

74 cm

48

I

GEORGE MEREDITH.



Dawson's Ph. Gr.

GEORGE MEREDITH

A STUDY

BY

HANNAH LYNCH
//

Methuen & Co.

18, BURY STREET, LONDON, W.C.

1891

[*All rights reserved*]

PR
5014
L8



To
ROSAMOND VENNING.

MY DEAR MISS VENNING,

Will you, when you read this little book of mine, find fault with my unmeasured Hibernian enthusiasms and antipathies, and quote your favourite Greek advice—*μηδὲν ἄγαν*? So that you bring to the reading of it some surrender of your reserve and a break in that classic moderation that we poor barbarians do not quite understand—violently tintured as we are by nature—it will be a fresh debt added to the life-long debt I gladly owe destiny for that memorable first meeting in Athena's charming little city.

The thought of it waves memory back into broad sunshine untravelled by clouds, among sun-stained marble pillars and rose and mauve tinted hills, girdling purple waters, and the long silver olive plain of Attica. Do you remember still our first walk along the cactus-bordered path to the Acropolis? Was it not of 'Tragic Comedians' that we talked?

So now, years after, I offer you in grateful remembrance this little gathering of ideas you may not wholly share, but will not wholly reject, through affection for your friend, to whom so wide a difference would be nothing less than a real misfortune.

HANNAH LYNCH.

PARIS, *February*, 1891.

P R E F A C E .

A COUPLE of months ago I was asked to give a lecture in Paris on a modern English writer, and I naturally selected my favourite, the subject of this little book. It was afterwards suggested to me that the lecture would bear expansion, a task I the more readily undertook because I was happy enough to learn that my humble effort had sent at least three intellectual foreigners to the fountain-head to study for themselves the novels of Mr. Meredith, curious to see if I had not overrated his merits, as is the habit of enthusiastic disciples, and greatly astonished to find their expectations disappointed, and my estimate unexaggerated.

While still engaged upon this work I received from London Mr. Le Gallienne's book, 'George Meredith,' and not having by me copies of 'Modern Love' or the other poems of Mr. Meredith, I availed myself of his quotations of the famous sonnet and 'A Meeting.' I have also taken from Mr. Lane's Bibliography, added to Mr. Le Gallienne's book, the dates of the appearance of each of the novels, as my own copies all belong to the recent uniform editions published by Messrs. Chapman and Hall.

HANNAH LYNCH.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE GRADUAL RECOGNITION OF GEORGE MEREDITH AS A NOVELIST . . .	I
II. MEREDITH'S STYLE AND INFLUENCE . . .	25
III. THE NOVELS OF GEORGE MEREDITH: 'RICHARD FEVEREL' AND 'RHODA FLEMING' . . .	53
IV. 'EVAN HARRINGTON,' 'THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND,' 'SANDRA BELLONI,' AND 'BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER' . . .	89
V. 'THE EGOIST,' 'DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS,' 'TRAGIC COMEDIANS,' AND 'SHAVING OF SHAGPAT' . . .	117
VI. GEORGE MEREDITH'S MEN AND WOMEN . . .	153

GEORGE MEREDITH.

CHAPTER I.

THE GRADUAL RECOGNITION OF GEORGE MEREDITH AS A NOVELIST.

It is our habit to class under the name of light literature all fiction, from that of Richardson to the ephemeral stories of the latest London favourite, though, as a matter of fact, even that historic bore, Gibbon, is not heavier reading than the novels of Richardson. We accept the term 'light' literature in a high sense as well as in a low one, and to the high class of light writers belong our old English masters and friends, Fielding, Scott, and Thackeray. These writers were purely and simply novelists,

and if they showed themselves to the thinkers in their just interpretation of the motives whence actions and complications arise, and the consequences to which they lead us, it was hardly because they thought so much 'as that they observed exactly, and, with the exquisite intuition of genius, penetrated life and its meaning by the road of sympathy rather than reflection, and unconsciously gave the colour of philosophy to their reproduction of observations.

Men of wide sympathies and humorous observers, which are the two most truthful qualities of portraiture, they were able to enter into all, or nearly all, phases of existence, and under the influence of the personalities and the scenes they portrayed, give us what I take to be a false impression—that of having deliberately thought out each one. The falseness of this impression is proved by the confession of Thackeray and Dickens, that no one could be more completely surprised than either by the doings

and sayings of their various characters. And this confession is borne out by the mixture of exuberant spirits and sentiment that colours all the works of these novelists. Serious thinkers are neither prone to exhibit high spirits, like schoolboys let loose among pens and paper and a reckless abundance of ink, nor tears of sentiment, like a distraught heroine recording her melancholy impressions. Writers of this sort, however great and universal, are 'light,' because their double aim—for which we cannot be too grateful—is to touch us by the tragic or homely sorrows of existence, or to amuse us by the absurdities and tricks of our fellows, and if, by chance, they should happen to instruct us through the great lessons of life they unconsciously teach us, it is due to the simplicity and directness of their genius. And this is the estimate we English readers will ever preserve of Thackeray, in spite of the severe pronouncement against him beyond the Channel by our more artistic brethren.

He may preach, as the eminent French critic, M. Taine, complains; but we are glad to be so sermonized, and return to him as to a friend who can never fail us. He may digress, but we are thankful for such digressions as his, and feel that we would not yield his faults for the more acrid greatness of Balzac.

But this latter half of the nineteenth century has produced quite a different sort of novelist; one whose mission is deliberately chosen, heavily weighed, and unweariedly fulfilled. Not in the least anxious is he to amuse us, or rouse soft and pleasurable emotions in us. The artistic exactions of the dilettanti are unregarded by him, and his voice carries far other than the note of caressing persuasion in it. He does not court our suffrage, rather does he seek to break and bend us before the sweeping storm of thought, and carry us through new paths into a world where no word is idle, no action or instinct without its most serious consequences; heed-

less of the fact that we may entangle ourselves inextricably in the briars and brambles of a strange phraseology, indifferent to what may be our mental suffering in endeavouring to follow him, and decipher his oddly-clothed meaning.

This kind of writer is a thinker first and a novelist afterwards, and not a thinker only, but a scientific psychologist. The novel is to him the sum of his mental labour, as the system is that of the metaphysician. The simple art of the first story-teller, Homer, and of Scott, no less differs from his method than from Kant's 'Kritik.' His appearance, taking into account the materials of which his peculiar genius is composed, and the bewildering use he makes of them, is rare ; and if, happily, he should obtain a hearing, after long strife with the general stupidity of the blockheads and patient endurance of the bites and barks of literary puppydom at his heels, he is sure to create a revolution in the world which subsists on amusement and distraction by

this new way of popularizing philosophy through fiction and the rose-lights of imagination. His chance, of course, very much depends upon diction, and this explains to us George Eliot's immediate recognition. As the first of the modern analytical novelists in England, she had the good fortune to start by a simple and facile style, within reach of the least intellectual reader. Hence, those who did not want to be compelled to think, could, without twist or turning, without racking their brains, or grasping a distracted head in their palms, follow her story even when they ignored the profound mental consciousness from which it sprang. But picture the catastrophe, the wide convulsion and fright her first appearance as the author of 'Daniel Deronda' would have created! She would have had to wait, at least, as long for recognition and admiration as her great and inadequately appreciated successor.

Remote from her in point of style, though still of her school, by reason of severe

thought worked to a conclusion, oftener than hers an unanswerable interrogation, is the only living master in English literature — George Meredith. He stands beside her and Tolstoi in the rank of serious intellectual workers, though we may doubt if foreign nations will ever reach the glib acquaintance with his name and the titles of his books that they are pleased to boast with those of the Russian master. Mr. Meredith is above and beyond all a thinker, less simple and direct, less wholly preoccupied with the mission of improving humanity and beautifying life, than either George Eliot or Tolstoi. Perhaps he has a healthier conviction that the world is very well as it is, and that in the main it is all the better that we are neither so muddy nor so pink as realists and sentimentalists would have us believe, but are just comfortably spotted and well-meaning to escape excess of censure or admiration.

The British race, we know, has never been

remarkable for brilliancy, nor, to any special degree, has it given evidence of perspicacity. But nowhere has it shown such an inexcusable and comical consistency of stupidity as in its slow recognition of Mr. Meredith, and its blundering acceptance of him when once a few laudatory reviews have revealed to it the existence of a prophet in its midst. We have had among us for more than thirty years a giant, and a race of pigmies, noted for nothing but the absence of genius, of even marked individuality in their stream of literary production, that flows on continuously and uneventfully, gape and blink at the odd sound of his voice, and persist in regarding him as a grotesque monster. He brings us the fruits of his colossal intellect in masterpiece after masterpiece, and because he applies some hard knocks to our understanding, never bright and always fearful of the new, we either turn from him in cold neglect, or else we grow witty with the wit of pigmies, at his expense, and accuse him 'of

breaking his shins over his own wit.' That which we do not understand, we decide, with the superiority of the inane and the ignorant, to be not worthy the understanding. Used as we have been to the lucid prose of Thackeray and the brilliant vulgarity and homeliness of Dickens, spoiled as our literary talent has been more recently by the flood of bloodless fiction poured into the circulating libraries and fast bringing the monthly magazines to a deadlock of incompetency and unimaginative drivel, can we wonder, though we may deplore, that the taste for excellence and vigour has diminished?

That his first novel, 'Richard Feverel,' should have passed unheeded, in spite of the remarkable review which the *Times* gave it in 1859, is something to wonder at, for surely such a book might have been expected to startle the best of his country into superlative praise, and meet with immediate popularity. It had already been preceded by a volume of notable poetry, by that

extraordinary *tour de force*, 'The Shaving of Shagpat,' and by 'Farina, a Legend of Cologne.' Yet these were not sufficient to convince his fellows that in their presence stood mighty genius claiming the poor return it is in our power to make it—the hospitality and welcome of our minds. Does such denseness deserve pity or blame? For churlishness it cannot be called, as the neglect shown the great is never deliberate. Two years were we left to sharpen our wits upon the pages of 'Richard Feverel,' and, mayhap, acquire a taste for qualities utterly novel to the age and, in a measure, to the nation—for something more than English characteristics go to the forming of a writer like Mr. Meredith—and in 1861 we were asked to make what we could of 'Evan Harrington.' The story appeared in *Once a Week*, and was illustrated by the late Charles Keene, under the title of 'Evan Harrington; or, He Would be a Gentleman.' Mr. Stevenson makes doleful mention of a serial

of Meredith's that nearly wrecked a newspaper financially, and presumably this was the unlucky experiment, from which it may be gathered that 'Evan Harrington' had no greater success than 'Richard Feverel,' and that the hour of recognition had not yet dawned. Explain it who can. Was there not a grain of perversity at the bottom of it? And can there be a more thankless task than that of labouring against the tide of fatal dulness, or an unkindler solitude than that of a man who is a head and a half above the tallest of his fellows, and can neither lift them up to his level nor descend to theirs? There are compensations, certainly, but these only serve to mitigate the sufferings of intellectual isolation, and, to the artist, can never fill adequately the place of generous and hearty appreciation. Wrapped in his philosophic cloak, the thinker may make shift to do without his fellows, and call them by hard names, but to the artist and the poet, sympathy and the warm praise of living voices

is like sunshine to the human frame. But reliable, if rare, critics had begun to find him out. In 1862, when his second book of poetry appeared, 'Modern Love,' the *Spectator* chose to assail, as an unfledged beginner, the man who had given such work as his to the world; whereupon Mr. Swinburne, wrathful, though not invective—rare chance!—wrote a letter that all disciples of Meredith remember with gratitude. But it is still hard for us to understand how the career of any man of letters could be so slow, and appreciation so long grudged him, as has been the case with a penman of so pronounced a type. That he should excite hostility, being himself of no tender fabric, is comprehensible and easily explained by the impatience and sense of irritation that he often rouses in the breasts of his admirers. But we can recognise the qualities and greatness of the writer who provokes our hostility, and generously give him that which is his due, while not withholding that which

he excites. Writing of 'Modern Love,' Mr. Swinburne, who is certainly upon his own ground in criticising a brother poet, says, 'Every section of this great progressive poem is connected with the other by links of the finest and most studied workmanship,' and that 'a more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out' than the noble sonnet beginning,

'We saw the swallows gathering in the skies.'

Bear in mind this was written by the third living English poet in the year 1862, of a comparatively unknown poet, while yet Browning and Tennyson were writing their best. And then explain how it is that Meredith the poet is still less known than Meredith the novelist, and that until very lately reading people, if asked about George Meredith, invariably corrected the rash questioner by the suggestion that he doubtless meant *Owen* Meredith. With Owen Meredith they were familiar enough, but George

Meredith? They would shake their heads and tell you that they never heard of him, or if, perchance, they had, invariably added the rumour that they had also heard: 'A perfectly unreadable writer, I believe, whom nobody—possibly not even himself—understands, and very few try to understand.'

Five or six years ago I imagined this incredible ignorance to be exclusive to Dublin, where we are not very assiduous in the pursuit of literature, or of anything else but the fortunes of the political heroes of the hour. But upon crossing the Channel, and finding myself in the blessed atmosphere of literary fervour and progress, I was amazed to see how few were the literary persons I met who knew much more of Mr. Meredith than his name, and even here I was more than once confronted with the inevitable Owen Meredith. That the lovers of Mr. Rider Haggard and John Strange Winter should not read his works is but the completion of their intellectual taste; and strange,

indeed, would it be to see a copy of 'Diana of the Crossways' in the hands of these worthy persons; but that the readers of Shakespeare and Thackeray and George Eliot should shun him—this is where the incredible and inexplicable eccentricity of public taste displays itself. And yet in 1862 he had written :

'We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier isle we heard their noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye.
But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride.
Love that had robb'd us so, thus bless'd our dearth !
The pilgrims of the year wax'd very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the west, and, like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love that had robb'd us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
And still I see across the twilight wave
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.'

It may be argued that the long delay in the acknowledgment of his sovereignty is

due to himself, to his obscurities, his ruggedness, his enormous intellectual difficulties offered the reader, like five-barred gates, to leap, and, in the event of failure, fall against, stunned and aching all over from the force of big mental bruises. But Browning is fifty times more obscure, more rugged, more difficult. It is true, Browning's apotheosis, in somewhat ironical form, lies in a Browning Society that, perhaps, may achieve a glossary and a full compilation of notes. Whereas, all the poet asks us to bring to him is a little thought and some brains. As Browning has his lucid and melodious words, when the simplest may understand him upon a first reading, so has Mr. Meredith—a fact that does not seem to have served him to such popularity as Browning enjoyed. Can anything be sweeter, softer, more musical than this little poem 'The Meeting'?—

'The old coach-road thro' a common of furze,
With knolls of pine, ran white:
Berries of autumn, with thistles and burrs,
And spider-threads droop'd in the light.

'The light in a thin blue veil peer'd sick ;
The sheep grazed close and still ;
The smoke of a farm by a yellow rick
Curl'd lazily under a hill.

'No fly shook the round of the silver net ;
No insect the swift bird chased ;
Only two travellers moved and met
Across that hazy waste.

'One was a girl with a babe that throve,
Her ruin and her bliss ;
One was a youth with a lawless love,
Who claspt it the more for this.

'The girl for her babe humm'd prayerful speech ;
The youth for his love did pray ;
Each cast a wistful look on each,
And either went their way.'

And still are we confronted with the mystery of such a poet's unpopularity. Explain it by the unattractiveness of his difficulties, and what have you to say against the soothing charm and the exquisite simplicity of such lines as these, that linger in the memory, not only because of their delicate music, but because of their vividness of picture and the autumn sadness that

lies upon it. In workmanship the poem is equal to the best of its sort, and Heine, in his matchless songs, has never touched us with a pathos more searching from its unpretentiousness.

Two years after the appearance of 'Modern Love,' 'Emilia in England' was published, and in the same year M. E. D. Forgues translated an adaptation of it for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, under the title of 'Sandra Belloni, Roman de la Vie Anglaise.' This looks like progress in public opinion. At least, it may be thought, after thirteen years of neglected labour in strife with feeble and vitiated taste, the author of so much brilliant work is upon the point of enthusiastic recognition. Not so at all. 'Emilia' created as little sensation as 'Richard,' and we may believe that the subscribers to the circulating libraries were as little fluttered by the production of the one as they had been by that of the other—being equally unaware of the existence of either. The book was not ex-

tensively reviewed, and only the happy few congratulated themselves upon the acquisition. Perhaps their satisfaction in it was increased by the fact that it was not shared by the crowd, for though the lovers of an unappreciated novelist may ardently desire to bestrew their paths with converts, it is not unusual in them to cover themselves in a sort of fierce and holy pride with a bit of his cloak of isolation. If he is miserably misunderstood, do not they share to some extent his misfortunes? And is there not a very decided superiority—sad, if you will, for none but the churlish and carping few desire to keep salvation and paradise exclusively for themselves—in the fact of their mutual want of appreciation?

‘Rhoda Fleming’ appeared in 1865, and this book seems to have made a more decided impression, though the writer still remained in the background among well-known men of letters, and his name, like his presence, was on the whole ignored. It was

published by Messrs. Tinsley, in itself an instructive lesson in the author's popularity. But there can be no doubt that the tide was changing, slowly, it is true—indeed, imperceptibly. In 1867 'Vittoria' first came out in the *Fortnightly Review*, a review henceforth devoted to the fiction of Mr. Meredith, and to which he seems to have contributed a good many reviews and short poems. After this, in 1871, we meet him in *Cornhill* recording the brilliant and ever-delightful adventures of 'Harry Richmond,' and this, coupled with the fact that Mr. George Du Maurier illustrated the story, and that it ran through two editions in the same year, gives us breathing-space in our long vent of indignation. We may now conclude that a portion, at least, of the British public had awaked, and were capable of relishing such entrancing novels as 'Richard Feverel,' 'Sandra Belloni' and 'Harry Richmond,' in which we hardly read so much as we drink in life, vividly, eagerly—life with all its

sharp, sweet thrills and poignant aversions, its breathless alternation of mood and swift race of the passions.

‘Beauchamp’s Career’ followed in 1876, first in the *Fortnightly Review*, between 1874 and 1876, and afterwards in Messrs. Chapman and Hall’s collected editions of 1886 and 1889. Although Mr. Meredith’s career cannot be said to have been crowned with anything like a wide acknowledgment, or even anything approaching a fair reward, until he wrote ‘Diana of the Crossways’ in 1885, which brought him his first taste of substantial and general success, and cast a retrospective glamour upon its predecessors, people from the date of ‘Harry Richmond’ began to know that there was a novelist named George Meredith who was not *Owen Meredith*.

Considering all that the writer has had to contend with in the way of block-headedness, this is most certainly a step in advance. But to his own especial minority, it is not

‘Diana,’ with all its charm and its perilous brilliancy, that crowns Mr. Meredith’s career, but that unique masterpiece, ‘The Egoist,’ which was published in 1879. Here was a memorable triumph of art, at which we have not yet ceased to wonder, and which we hold apart from all other books that we have read. After it he may write ‘Tragic Comedians,’ ‘Diana of the Crossways,’ and volumes of poems. Anything he writes we are prepared to welcome with cordial delight and gratitude, but we do not expect another Sir Willoughby Patterne. We are satisfied with the impossibility of the repetition of such an achievement. It is not given to many artists to produce one flawless work, and to expect a second from even such a mighty one as this would be to prove one’s self insatiable.

From this time forward, reviews, articles, criticisms—hostile, humorous, and eulogistic—begin to abound; and by the time of ‘Diana’s’ appearance, the British public

has been made ready to receive the intelligence that a master is in their midst—a living, breathing master, such as Tennyson and Browning, and from whom work may happily still be expected. What effect this announcement may have had upon the British public cannot be perfectly defined. Being unenthusiastic, except in the matter of low and familiar literature, it is to be feared that such news has but moderately moved it, and in the matter of taste, has not influenced it at all. This new master is unfamiliar to them in his speech and in his ideas. He does not dwell upon sordid scenes with visible pleasure; he claims them with a voice that is not of their common tongue, and faces them without the old-fashioned twinkle of the grave jester's glance. If he caricatures humanity, it is not as Dickens caricatures it, to tickle us into inextinguishable laughter, nor yet as Thackeray does, in a vein of comic satire. If he calls upon us to recognise that life is often a

sad blunder, and to pity the blunderers, he is neither sentimental in his claim, nor consciously pathetic. He indulges neither in the mawkish sentiment of Dickens, nor in the sentimental tenderness of Thackeray, and as little courts our tears as our laughter. Brain is what he asks of us, and its use in reading him.

CHAPTER II.

MEREDITH'S STYLE AND INFLUENCE.

To succeed in qualifying a style so varied and so strange as Mr. Meredith's, and composed of so many diverse elements, would be difficult even for his peers. Its quality is at the same time rugged and elusive, obscure and dazzlingly brilliant, witty and profound, harsh and most musically tender, light as a summer cloud, majestic as a storm. But his great defect is artificiality. His splendid pages and his matchless dialogues never lose the obtrusive flavour of the midnight oil, and we see most of his characters through a blinding glitter of limelight. This excessive use of artificial illumination, while fascinating us and

compelling our admiration for the writer's extraordinary cleverness, wearies us and irritates us at times, and we long for the mental repose of a whiff of commonplace and a page or two, by way of interlude, of fluent easy prose that rests the eye and the brain. There are so many tricks and surprises bestrewing our path, five-barred gates starting unexpectedly for us to leap; we are deliberately plunged neck and heels into so many swamps, and bowled over all sorts of rocks and stones, with the oddest sensations in conflict, that we more than once pay our debt grudgingly, and, like a peaceable man knocked down by a bludgeon, are amazed at the liberty that has been taken with our understanding. In this exuberant display of his own powers does Meredith show himself to be thoroughly English. He is unapproachable as a wrestler with words and phrases, and infuses dead speech with the vitality of blood and muscles. Words with him are like thoughts—strong, living, tangible

to the touch of the soul. They seem to fly, and mount, and flutter round us, to catch our breath forcibly, and hold our imagination in the grasp of blood-warmed fingers. The most ordinary action of life, described by him in a line or two, is not a photograph, but a vivid revelation, a scene stamped not on the vision, but upon the mind. When he is not playing queer tricks with us and keeping every sense insufferably alert, every nerve strained to catch the meaning that dances tantalizingly before us, flying hither and thither upon fantastic figures of speech, until the writer himself seems drunk with his own juggling, he is quieting our baffled senses by these sharp revelations that have no artificial glamour about them. He ceases to be the inhuman metaphorist, and becomes our brother again, and we forget that he ever terrified us. I open 'Evan Harrington' at random, and alight on a paragraph where each word is vividly set in a perfect whole. There is no twist or turning here, and as we

see the red harvest-moon and the dark water and trees, so we seem to touch the hand of suffering youth :

‘ Over a length of the stream the red, round harvest-moon was rising, and the weakened youth was this evening at the mercy of the charm that encircled him. The water curved, and dimpled, and flowed flat, and the whole body of it rushed into the spaces of sad splendour. The clustered trees stood like temples of darkness; their shadows lengthened supernaturally ; and a pale gloom crept between them on the sward. He had been thinking some time that Rose would knock at his door and give him her voice, at least ; but she did not come ; and when he had gazed out on the stream until his eyes ached, he felt that he must go and walk by it. Those little flashes of the hurrying tide spoke to him of a secret rapture and of a joy-seeking impulse—the pouring onward of all the blood of life into one illumined heart, mournful from excess of love.’

In none of his books do such passages abound as in 'Richard Feverel,' unless, perhaps, in 'Harry Richmond.' These two books, and in a lesser degree 'Sandra Beltoni,' may best be described as picturesque and melodious. The writer is less a thinker than a poet, and sometimes he sings with a sweetness that troubles our vision and catches us queerly about the throat.

But viewing him upon the ground of the simple story-teller, we must admit that this is a ground either foreign to Mr. Meredith's original genius, or deliberately shunned by him. The good old fashion, so dear to Scott and Thackeray, of bringing everything to a definite conclusion, either for better or worse, and clearing up all doubts as to the ultimate career of even their minor characters, is a fashion that he, with some cruelty and much contempt for the ordinary reader, utterly discards. He cares not a jot for our sympathy, still less for our judgment. He notes that life is chiefly interrogatory and unsatisfactory

—an unfinished drama rarely terminating with the rightful wedding - bells or the merited reward; that choice is rarely justified by results, and that good and evil still remain vexed questions to be decided, as far as definite decision is possible, except upon their broadest issues, by temperament and individuality, by race and sex and training, as faith and love are decided. Look at the end of all his stories, and you will find yourself confronted with the unanswerable question which is sure to fix us in the examination of the lives of each one of us. There is the fatal tide, we know, but can we dare to say at what precise turning of the road of life we missed it?

This is the philosophy that ‘Richard Feverel’ exposes — conjectural, questioning; a drawn game between reason and impulse, between nature and intellect, between a philosopher’s system and a young man’s first love. Neither win, because, though a mighty fighter and a Homeric wrestler with words,

Meredith is not of the definite school, and will not pander to his readers' tastes either way. Are you for the mismanaged poor hero, or for the disappointed philosopher, gazing in the last page upon the system fondly built upon sand, and laid in ruins by the first breath of purely human disaster? Mr. Meredith resolves that your sympathies shall be balanced, as his own are soundly balanced. He leaves you with a question upon your lips, and your childish reproach is chidden by his silence.

Richard is the strongest and best hero the writer has drawn, before he fell in love with the more intricate complexities of woman, and delighted in her intellectual surprises, her social difficulties and struggles with iron fate and masculinity. We part with him as he rises from a sick-bed, widowed and broken upon the outset of brilliant manhood, enshadowed in a tragic gloom, and who is to explain to us the evolution of middle-age in this youth of burning hope and rash promise?

Not the creator, certainly. The throes of commonplace speculation into which he may thrust the ordinary reader trouble him not, and he is less merciful to him even than Tolstoi. He takes us from that strong Shakespearean scene, in which Richard reads the diary of Clare Doria Forey, unveiling her unconscious and reticent love, only fully measured by her on the threshold of a loveless marriage, while overhead the candles are burning in her mortuary chamber, and flickering lugubriously upon the lips that have spoken to him from 'behind the hills of death'; and without giving us time to clear our throats of the gathered sensations of pity and pain, he hurls us into fresh emotions, equally painful, by the death of Lucy, Richard's young wife. And after that we learn nothing more of Richard, and are at liberty to decide for ourselves whether Sir Austin, the broker system creator, and Lady Blandish married, like any other pair of middle-aged lovers, or preferred to continue

in the less definite and secure path of platonic sentimentalities—the one studying the pilgrim's scrip, the other adding to its wisdom.

The fault is perhaps to be laid to our complex, inquiring, and unrobust age, that men like Tolstoi and Meredith should both be incomplete as artists and as thinkers. Completeness in art belongs to simplicity of thought and directness of vision, and these are the attributes of the real story-teller, who is never diverted from his task by philosophic conjecture or by psychological problems. Mr. Meredith's incompleteness is shown in an affectation of oddness and an artificial glamour that leave the reader with senses and wits perturbed, anxiously questioning the gravity of the writer, apprehensive of being laughed at, and not altogether sure that he has not been assisting at the marvellous performance of a juggling metaphorist, instead of the discoveries and exposition of a serious philosopher. This artificial glamour is more sparingly used in 'Richard Feverel';

hence, perhaps, its larger popularity than any of his other works. But it is hardly, as a whole, so great as 'The Egoist,' 'Rhoda Fleming,' or 'Diana of the Crossways.' In it the quality of tenderness, noticeably absent in the rest, abounds, and also a lovely freshness and a visible delight in youth and in youthful joys. It is a work pre-eminently human, with all the defects and qualities of humanity strongly marked. Had it been written in blood, it could not be redder with life. Vitality is its captivating charm and melody its voice. As a work of art, it may be far from perfect, and we recognise that it is marred by many impossible situations, errors of taste and judgment, and a tendency, in the portrayal of the famous Mrs. Berry, to gross caricature. Nevertheless, we love it, faults and all, with that strong personal love and a wish for frequent dipping at its sources that it is the unshared privilege of truly great and original productions to inspire. How many are the writers we turn to in all moods,

knowing we shall ever find something new, something helpful in their familiar pages ! Shakespeare for the English mind and for a very few foreigners ; Montaigne, and perhaps Molière, for others. Others, again, decide between Scott, Thackeray, and George Eliot. Add to this limited sphere a half-dozen of the world's best poets, and the circle of comforters and permanent friends is formed. In such choice company may Meredith present himself with ' Richard Feverel ' in his hand, and his place will be no mean one in their midst. Shakespeare himself might offer him the cordial hand-clasp of brotherhood, and assure him that since the appearance of Beatrice and Portia, no such women as Diana, Emilia, and his German princess had ever shot upon the dull world from masculine brains.

In Meredith's very faults there is an excess of strength. It is this superabundance and an impatience of drivelling sentiment that lead him so frequently to shock our

nineteenth-century taste. I think he shocks us with deliberate aim, deeming our taste questionable and unrobust, and our fastidiousness unhealthy. These blows directed against our temple of false modesty are in no book fiercer and more astounding than in 'Richard Feverel,' and in no other book has he risen to such supreme heights. Here you have at its best the matchless splendour and majesty of his prose, and pages of prolonged beauty. You have ample scope to realize the vividness of his interpretation of nature, and the delight of young love so magically unveiled by him in those three beautiful chapters on the opening romance of Richard and Lucy—'Ferdinand and Miranda,' 'Diversions played on a Penny Whistle,' and 'Time-honoured Treatment of a Dragon by a Hero.' Which of these three chapters to choose it would be difficult to say, for there is nothing like them in all English literature for sweetness, melody, and pulse-moving charm. If I had to pronounce, I should be

disposed to give the preference to the 'Penny Whistle' chapter, though, from the fact that the first meeting between Richard and Lucy is oftenest quoted, I judge it to be the most popular.

• Match me this exquisite picture in prose or poetry : 'The sun is coming down to earth, and the fields and the waters shout to him golden shouts. He comes, and his heralds run before him, and touch the leaves of oaks and planes and beeches lucid green, and the pine-stems redder gold ; leaving brightest footprints upon thickly-weeded banks, where the foxgloves' last upper-bells incline, and bramble shoots wander amid moist rich herbage. The plumes of the woodland are alight ; and beyond them, over the open, 'tis a race with the long-thrown shadows ; a race across the heaths and up the hills, till, at the farthest bourne of mounted eastern cloud, the heralds of the sun lay rosy figures and rest.'

Or yet again, this other : 'The tide of

colour has ebbed from the upper sky. In the west the sea of sunken fire draws back, and the stars leap forth and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of cloud from her shoulders, and, with her foot upon the pine-tops, surveys heaven.'

In these three chapters we have Mr. Meredith not only at his best, but better than many of the best poets upon their own ground. He sings rather than speaks. He neither wants to astonish nor affright us, but solely to enchant us. And who can read him and remain unmoved—withstand the spell he casts upon us? Shelley was never more musical, more thrilling, and never so strong.

But there is much else in the novels of this remarkable writer besides music and poetry, and the soft showery joys and sorrows of young love. There are the qualities and deficiencies of his tragic and his mighty side as a pendant for the grace and charm of the

mood we have seen. Everything in him is pronounced. He has a taste for strong lights and shadows, for grotesque asides and interruptions; is sometimes crude, always complex, and often incomplete. His coarseness is akin to the coarseness that shakes us to amazement in the tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare, where ribaldry and lovely delicacy go hand-in-hand; where, swift upon the most fanciful play of thought and scenes of pathetic beauty, and images as exquisite as a Theocritan idyl, come a burst of clownish mirth and hideous joking.

Shakespearean is the word to describe Meredith, both in his defects and in his qualities. In each is he great, with something of the unapproachable greatness, the originality, the blood and brains and nerve, of the Stratford poet, towering over his fellows to-day as Shakespeare, alive, towered over his. Human to the heels, a seer and a psychologist in one, no word is lightly written, no character lightly drawn. He delights in

humanity, and almost wickedly revels in its eccentricities. Hence his tendency to exaggeration. He seizes a queer character, such as old Tom Cogglesby, John Raikes, or Mrs. Berry, and, not content with their natural oddities, like Dickens, he must steep them in the colours of his own imagination; with the result that they come out of the process caricatures, and we find it exceedingly hard to divest them of their comic garb, and trace them back to the elemental, whence they started on their devious wanderings through their creator's mind. This characteristic, as M. Taine observes, is peculiarly English. Since Rabelais' days the French writers are too hampered by laws and rules in art, inalterable, like those of the Medes and Persians, to dare play such tricks with reality and human nature as Dickens, Thackeray, and Meredith, in their jesting moods, permit themselves. Scott's moods had no such promptings, perhaps because he was a better story-teller than any of the three, and

found the humour of life quite sufficient without the aid of exaggeration. But then there was no satire or hardness in all Scott's nature, and manly tenderness and sympathy were his predominant traits. He wrote stories for the pleasure of writing them, not to belabour or ridicule poor worn humanity, in which he kept his faith green and unquestioning as a child's.

But, like Dickens, Meredith is a poet, and, like him, has all a poet's extravagances and excesses. Scott, as a poet, is never excessive, never exuberant, and always exact. His strength is employed with a Scotch perception of its just value, whereas his Saxon brothers waste theirs with an endless profusion. Not that I would compare Meredith with Dickens, except in his tendency to caricature, which in Dickens is a vice, and in his poetical excesses. He tortures metaphor at times, and lacks measure. This is the complaint French artists bring against their English brethren. Perhaps their greater

physical strength, added to the Teutonic strain that flows through their blood from the early ages, runs to excess in imagination, and produces a conception of the grotesque unapprehended by the French. Certain it is that the latter escape our violent emotions in literature, and cannot arrive at an understanding of them. Our sensibilities, strung to common themes, and unexcited by lawless love and cerebral complications, rouse their wonder; and the mixture of buffoonery and satire in our great writers incurs their indignation. For this they say we are not artists, and ignore the classical limitations of art. And doubtless they are right. Upon the whole, our works of art are less artistic than theirs, and are produced in a lesser quantity, while our greatest works sin frequently against every known canon of art.

In shedding a double ray of ridicule upon his comic characters, Mr. Meredith so envelops and twists them in metaphor, now

mildly sarcastic, now a joyous shout of laughter, we cannot tell with or at us, for we are not in the secret of his comic moods ; and at times so bitinglly ironical that we are puzzled and astray. Fain would we know whether he feels tenderly towards us at our worst, or cherishes an inalterable contempt for us at our best. For, unlike Thackeray, he is no moralist. Here, at least, is an English novelist whom M. Taine cannot accuse of laying down hard and fast rules for our moral benefit. His two most cynical characters attract some of our sympathy. Whereas we are ordered to loathe and condemn Becky Sharpe, and feel how much her railing creator despised her, Meredith allows us to be glad of his Countess's acquaintance, and shows us that a cynical, intriguing woman, full of vulgar pride and not illegitimate ambition, may be interesting, and not unloved by her creator. He invites us to wonder at her, and not condemn, and though he may laugh at her weaknesses, and take

a wicked pleasure in exposing them, he cannot be said, on the whole, to show her any harshness. As an adventuress, she is unsurpassed, and, unlike poor Becky, lives and dies, we imagine, a fine lady, driven by ambition to duplicities, but not consciously mean or dishonest. Though a virtuous woman, her morals are crooked, and her sense of honour is the reverse of keen. We have seen how such a character in Thackeray's hands would develop, and to what lengths in heartlessness his satire carried him. Meredith's Countess is possible; but Becky Sharpe is impossible.

The same may be said of his male villains. Indeed, he has none. There is something eminently human in the egoism of the wise youth Adrian Harley. We greet him ever with a cheerful smile, and for one of his witty remarks would have no, or only a very slight, objection to part with our last five-pound note. Contrast him with Barnes Newcome, and you have all the difference

between black and gray. All Thackeray's bad people are irredeemably bad, and all his good people hardly want wings to fit them for the angelic sphere. It is true, his female angels do not inspire us with a very ardent yearning for the joys of Paradise, if they are to be shared in such extremely insipid and melancholy society. Eternity with Amelia and Laura Pendennis and Lady Castlewood could not be described as a captivating perspective.

But Mr. Meredith must not be acquitted of any pronounced sins against reality. English taste is such, and its restrictions and exuberances are so little in accordance with life as it is lived by even those who paint it falsely, that it is impossible for the English novelist to escape sins of the sort. In general, Meredith is sufficiently just to humanity in its faults and in its virtues; it is only when its oddities catch hold of his fancy that he runs riot, and surpasses nature; only then is he apt to

e/

overdraw his account upon the bank of credulity.

Take, for example, Mrs. Berry, whom Mr. Le Gallienne, in a recent interesting study of Mr. Meredith, describes as a character that would have been a feather in Dickens' cap. Doubtless, but that is not a compliment to Mr. Meredith, for what might do honour to Dickens cannot be said to be worthy of him. Mrs. Berry is witty and original to an alarming degree. She is a sort of compromise between Mrs. Quickly and Juliet's nurse; not quite so coarse as either, perhaps, but more exhaustively garrulous and obtrusive. In the fifteenth century she might have been possible and pleasant, but not so in ours. She is an anachronism that we resent. The fault may be with us, but the fact remains, that we could not tolerate a Mrs. Berry in the flesh. Of such a servant a man of genius, or one of a humorous turn, might be glad as a study; but can we imagine lending a patient ear to her free

speech, a stately and solemn old English gentleman, if capable of understanding what we call humour, only in its highly starched and faultlessly correct form? A student of mankind, certainly, after a certain prejudiced fashion, especially convinced of the inferiority of woman, as it behoves a poor gentleman who has suffered grievous wrong at the hands of a daughter of Eve; but one whose collar laughter is never likely to wrinkle or crush, and whose features under no temptation can relax into anything broader than a grim stiff smile. Picture this paternal prig and polished library philosopher being entertained by Juliet's nurse and Falstaff's landlady, and pronouncing both to be excellent women!

A gentleman who loved his Lamb and relished his Dickens would put up with her for the sake of her wit and originality, accepting her as a possible character, which I am not disposed to do. But no young girl, with even less of Lucy's refinement, could submit to her gross indelicacy in that scene between

them in the Isle of Wight. We know how reticent and shy young girls have become since Juliet's day ; still more so young brides with the most intimate of their sex—their mothers and their sisters ; how easily affronted are their susceptibilities by the slightest trending towards ground that they so savagely regard as sacred. It is as much as one's life is worth almost to speak to a very young bride about her married life ; above all, if she be deeply enamoured of her husband, and for her mother to seek to unveil it would be a sacrilege. Mr. Meredith, who makes straight for nature divested of the swaddling clothes of sentimentality, and prefers her mud to the sentimentalist's spangles and pink clouds, will perhaps say that the excess of delicacy to which naturally sensitive and fastidious womanhood has let itself be trained is artificial, unhealthy, and absurd. I do not dispute that a little more of savage candour would be an improvement to women, and that excessive delicacy leads them by a very

apparent slope into pruriency. But honesty and candour, with modesty, are surely better than either without it, and if, for the sake of honesty and candour, we show ourselves willing to dispense with an excessive modesty for that of naturalness, surely we must lose one of the nameless, and not the least, charms of maidenliness! This reproach I make to Lucy is not only in the case of her tolerance of Mrs. Berry's coarse talk, but in the occupation it enters her mind to allot her undeclared lover, Lord Montfalcon. I reproach, in fact, Mr. Meredith, with the entire creation, all the more so as she is the only girl he has drawn upon the old wearisome lines of masculine taste, of the eternal old-fashioned ivy-type, common-place, loving and pretty, without character or interest apart from her second in the immortal duet with his breathless hero. She is charming, as all creatures lovely to look upon and purely natural must be charming; but the freshness of youth and the pleasant daisy-and-buttercup flavour vanished

with the years and increasing domestic cares, what would there have remained in her to interest us and satisfy a soaring nature like Richard's? The affair of the cookery-book irritates and displeases us as much as it did her husband in the period of the moon of bliss, and the only satisfaction we extract from it is the inimitable wise youth's witty description of it in his letter to Lady Blandish. Bret Harte's speculative vision embraced a disastrous sequel to the union of the Judge and Maud Muller of Whittier's poem, and we may be permitted to picture Lucy twenty years after, with a bunch of keys at her waist, still studying the cookery-book, strong in the fabrication of preserves and home-made medicines, superintending her children's studies, and arching mournful and uncomprehending brows at the moral and intellectual vagaries a man like Richard would be certain to develop. An admirable wife and mother, but an inadequate study.

It has been remarked that for Mr. Mere-

dith's readers there is no half-way house between uncompromising hostility and discipleship. You either bend before him as your master—imperfect at times, genius having its limitations as all things else that are human, but great in his very imperfections—or you reject him utterly. How those who reject him can manage to reconcile it to their conscience, I am at a loss to understand. But this proves the texture and quality of his influence. It is immense or it is nought. And by this pronounced feeling he evokes may he be classed as the founder of a school. He has introduced a new element into English literature—a healthy and purely philosophic realism, which differs as widely from the realism of Fielding as it does from that of Zola. To French wit he brings German profundity of thought, the whole wrought into a thoroughly Saxon setting. Vividness of conception, intensity of vision, and strength of diction—combine these qualities, and you have English such as

no other writer has given us. It is beautiful, with a beauty all its own, and there seems to be no feat of which it is not capable. He has ransacked our language until he has wrought it, through a process of bewildering originality, into a flexibility, a forcible simplicity, a majesty and rhythm that, in his prose, surpass poetry. Never before have we received such a lesson in the unimagined resources of language. Never before did we so understand how written words may be made to seize us, fell us, captivate us, make vivid and tangible to our mind every image, every trick of person, every hue and aspect of nature. He does not describe or paint : he simply vitalizes inanimate objects. And if he had not made us his debtor in any other way, we must thank him for his great and perfect disciple, Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson.

CHAPTER III.

THE NOVELS OF GEORGE MEREDITH : ' RICHARD
FEVEREL ' AND ' RHODA FLEMING. '

As this little book is written for those who have the misfortune not to be acquainted with the novels of Mr. Meredith, I do not think it will be inadvisable to add to my essay a slight sketch of each one, hoping thereby to send readers to the head source. Those who allow themselves to be persuaded thereto will have reason to thank me, even should they be among the common majority, unable to appreciate to its full value the new chapter in English literature offered them.

Much mention has been made of ' Richard Feverel,' the novel of Mr. Meredith's youth, and, we are told, his own special favourite.

The plot of this powerful story turns from a mixture of graceful mirth, delicious wit, and profound reflection, to tragedy, upon what I humbly conceive to be an impossible situation. And this is the sudden separation of Richard from his young bride. But after noting the crudities and errors of taste and judgment, which are frequent enough in the book, and which never once hide from us the lambent flame of genius that steadily burns through the whole, our fear is lest our desire to praise adequately should drop us into hyperbole. It is so much easier to blame than to praise with taste—above all, to praise judiciously. Our wits will always devise fresh methods for a successful use of the whip of censure, but in admiration it is less easy to get beyond the exclamatory period, and the end of simple epithets is soon reached.

The stamp of a breathless originality lies upon each character, however minor, and commingled in their creation is an indescrib-

able mixture of weight and delicacy, of solid, massive strength and finish to a hair's breadth—the finish of a purely-cut cameo. Of the wise youth, that delightful cynic, turning to obesity, and devoted to his stomach, it would be impossible to say enough. Every sentence, long and short, that he utters is a gem of matchless and irresistible wit. Adrian Harley's wit is unique, and beside him Sheridan himself must be content with a lower place. If he breeds a sceptical thought in our breast, it is the doubt that any man in real life could be so continuously and unpremeditatedly witty throughout a reasonably long record of utterances. Though not purposely a leading character, he becomes so by force of his own individuality, and the pronounced part he plays in the development of Richard's career.

The story opens with a description of the inmates of Raynham Abbey, the seat of Sir Austin Feverel, the hero's father. This quaint individual is introduced to us as the

anonymous author of a notable book, 'The Pilgrim's Scrip,' with one aphorism of which we are startled on the first page : ' I expect that woman will be the last thing civilized by man.' We see at once that we have to deal with a gentleman who, like Plato and Schopenhauer, and a long list of intervening philosophers, holds the amiable sex in scorn. Here we have 'the imperfect animal' of the one and 'the ugly sex' of the other more courteously, but not less contemptuously, defined. There is no pretension to novelty, for he admits that 'our new thoughts have thrilled dead bosoms.'

Reading further, we discover the clue to his scorn of woman. The poor gentleman has been wronged upon his hearth, and is a widower while yet his wife lives. He once had a wife he loved devotedly, and a friend, a poet, whom he trusted. The one betrayed his love and the other his confidence. The story is not new, but novel indeed is its effect upon Sir Austin Feverel. Bankrupt in love

and friendship, he fell upon bitterness. To keep his heart alive, while presenting a mask of indifference to intimates and relatives, he concentrated all his hopes upon his baby boy, and, for the child's ultimate misfortune, resolved to found a system for his benefit. But he wishes his paternal tenderness to remain unsuspected by others, and dismisses the nurse who caught him sobbing over his son's cradle.

The inmates of Raynham are certainly a queer collection of specimens : Hippias, once thought to be the genius of the family, but a premature victim to strong appetites and a weak stomach, living in the embraces of dyspepsia, and engaged in a perpetual contention with his dinner. Algernon Feverel, whose career as a gentleman of the Guards lay in his legs, until it was irrevocably cut short by the loss of one on a cricket-ground, when he devoted himself to the direction of his nephew's animal vigour 'with a melancholy vivacity.' A venerable lady, known as Great-Aunt

Grantley, who spent the day preparing for dinner and the night in remembering it. Mrs. Doria Forey, the baronet's eldest sister, who fixed herself at the Abbey with the intention of marrying her only daughter, Clare, to the Hope of Raynham. There are two other Feverel ladies, known as the mothers of two remarkable sons, one our delightful wise youth, Adrian Harley, and the other, Austin Wentworth, a noble youth, who had nobly redeemed a common fault in the lives of young men, by marriage, and 'was condemned to undergo the world's harsh judgment, not for the fault—for its atonement.' 'Adrian was noted for his sagacity, which carried the world, but brought him no friends. His problem for life was to satisfy his appetites without rashly staking his character.' He was polished, luxurious, and happy at the cost of others, and, while pursuing the maids of earth, enjoyed a reputation for virtue. The world declared him moral and wise, 'and the pleasing converse every way of his

disgraced cousin Austin.' And we ever greet him cordially, for all his vices, and the 'edge to his smile, which cuts much like a sneer.'

In this varied domestic circle Richard is brought up, the victim of a system. He was carefully kept from the corruption of public schools, and destined to enter upon manhood immaculate and perfect. On his fourteenth birthday we meet him in revolt against the system, and flying with his serf, Ripton, from a medical examination proposed by his father, who understands physical perfection to be wedded to moral perfection. Ripton tells him that his sentiments are those of a girl, whereupon the lads quarrel, as only boys and other barbarians quarrel, and make it up in gallant fashion when they hear voices coming in their search. Their running leads them to trespass, and brings them into ugly collision with one Farmer Blaize, who gives them a taste of the whip, and thus rouses a passion of indignation in Richard's breast. He

threatens to shoot the farmer, and instead conspires for revenge by arson. Here we are introduced to a silent and unobtrusive little maid, Richard's cousin Clare, who passes through the book a maidenly phantom, only tragically revealed to Richard and to us by her death and sorrowful little diary. Her offence with Richard on his birthday for his neglect of her, and her penetration at night into his chamber, is the second occasion in her short life for departing from the curious negation and reserve of her character. She drifts with circumstances, guided by her mother, and holds her tongue. Of her feelings and sentiments we are in the dark, until the despair of silence stretches her upon her deathbed in search of rest. Silent, white, not understood, she remains for us the most pathetic figure in the book. Neither she nor the author choose to court our sympathies by any of the ordinary sensational methods, and her cold pride and his reserve are equally powerful in securing them.

Meanwhile, the conspiring Richard, unmindful of Clare, is exciting profound reflection in the bosom of the wise youth. 'My respected chief,' the latter apostrophizes Sir Austin, 'combustibles are only the more dangerous for compression. This boy will be ravenous for earth when he is let loose, and very soon make his share of it look as foolish as yonder game-pie!' Hearing Sir Austin make the round of the house at night, he remarks: 'A monomaniac at large, watching over sane people in slumber.'

Sir Austin, marching onward, hears strange talk, between his son and Master Ripton, of fire and delay, and violence and vengeance, when Sir Austin condescends to play the spy. He discovers that the Hope of Raynham has embarked in his own vessel upon the waters of life. A sensation of infinite pity overcomes the poor baronet, asking himself what the years will do when one day has done so much; but he is consoled by the consciousness of his own

part of Providence to his son. Baited and worried by his sagacious cousin, who shrewdly suspects his guilt, Richard takes refuge in lies. He lies upon a gigantic scale, to the horror of his father and the amusement of his cousin. But there is a fine and captivating manliness in his lies. He is a perfect boy in all his moods—an English boy, barbaric, brave, and pure. Observing him, Adrian says : ‘ Boys are like monkeys, the gravest actors of farcical nonsense that the world possesses ’—which philosophizing leads him to Hamlet and Ophelia. ‘ She, poor maid ! asks for marriage and smiling babes, while my lord lover stands questioning the Infinite and rants to the Impalpable.’ And when reminded of his responsibilities as Richard’s tutor, he replies : ‘ I take my young prince as I find him : a Julian or a Caracalla, a Constantine or a Nero. Then if he will play the fiddle to a conflagration, he shall play it well ; if he must be a disputatious apostate, at any rate he shall understand logic

and men, and have the habit of saying his prayers.'

After the arson adventure, the shifts and lies, the failure of a scheme to help Tom Bakewell out of prison for his own crime, confession, and the bitter cup of an apology to Farmer Blaize, forced upon him by his father, Richard comes through the first stage of his ordeal a wiser and a better youth. There is a solemn reconciliation between him and the ruffled system-creator; tears, embraces, and a new aphorism on the part of Sir Austin: 'Expediency is man's wisdom; doing right is God's.' Reviewing affairs in an ingenuous letter to his fellow-conspirator, Richard says of his future divinity: 'Wherever there's mischief, there are girls, I think. She had the insolence to notice my face, and ask me not to be unhappy. I was polite, of course (British-boy fashion), but I would not look at her.'

This brings us to the blossoming and critical season of the system. Behold him

on the edge of youth, beautiful and strong in body, guileless and pure. He takes to blushing, long vigils, and consumes paper—all dangerous signs. The father is distressed, and orders him to burn his poetic effusions, deciding, since the mention of love is dangerous at this age, to put everyone at Raynham on their guard. Servants in love are dismissed, the others are ordered to be discreet and avoid kissing. The visits of a hopeless curate, in love with Mrs. Doria, are interdicted, and this excellent lady is ordered to remove her daughter from the Abbey. In this virtuous solitude Richard becomes wayward and miserable, rides like fire about the country, and has discovered the nothingness of all things. Adrian reports him as extraordinarily cynical. He startles Sir Austin in sentimental fooling with Lady Blandish's hand, and finds he has discovered the secret of life. He discourses pensively with other stricken males about women's names, and here we come upon the beautiful

introduction of Lucy, the second of the immortal duet of Meredith. Who does not remember that lovely passage beginning?—

‘Above’ green, flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reeds.’ This preludes the divine love-scenes, the sweet romance of boy and maid, in a setting of fair landscape, described as no other pen can describe English scenery. To analyze these chapters, or select any passages by preference, were as idle as to attempt to catch a sunray or sketch a flying cloud. They are written in sunlight to the music of love. To quote from them would be to spoil their beauty. As we read, it is not only on Richard that the gracious glory of heaven has fallen. We, too, are under the spell, and, while we read on, remember all we had thought forgotten and dead in the fold of forgotten years.

But Lucy is Farmer Blaize’s niece, and consequently no match for a baronet’s son. ✓

Sir Austin has gone up to London in search of a bride worthy the high gift of his son's untainted youth. His adventures are inimitably recorded. We delight in his interviews with Lawyer Thompson, in his unmasking of that harmless young scamp Master Ripton, and, above all, in his discovery of a suitable bride, when a few years have been added, in the daughter of one Mrs. Caroline Grandison, a female system-creator, whom the author presents as less amiable than her brother-perfecter of humanity. 'A perfect woman mirrored in her progeny,' Adrian describes her, and admits that he would prefer her to her progeny. The fates and his father conspire awhile against Richard, and after separation, illness and other discomposing events, he outwits his enemies and runs off with a bride of his own choice—Lucy, the rustic maid.

Up to this point the book is perfect. But here comes the stumbling-block. Would a

youth, whose purity and innocence would be sure to give added strength to his first sweeping passion, in the middle of an ideal honeymoon, still bewildered by his bliss, allow himself, upon such a flimsy pretext as his father's indirectly-conveyed wish, to be separated from his bride? To be kept for months in London through the shallowest subterfuges? Would either of this passionate pair, seeing with the eyes of instinct that never errs, submit to this absurd and unreasonable separation? The Richard we know would have found a way to balk his elders and keep his bride by his side, or he would have seen through the plot, and would have flown back to her after a week's fretting and fuming in town. This would mean the loss of a great and tragic scene—his last parting with Lucy—though the probabilities would not have been outraged. But Shakespeare himself may incur such a reproach and be not less great, and a poignant situation may be reached by the road of

gross inconsistency and thrill us not the less.

Having so far assisted at the launching of youth upon the waters of happiness, we are invited to assist at something still more interesting—Richard's undertaking in the reform of spotted woman, his fall, his repentance, and his expiation. We are introduced to many new characters who do not edify us, but only one of whom is nearly irredeemably bad—one satellite of a worthless but not inhuman peer, the Hon. Peter Brayder. We have met the famous Berry, anciently the dismissed nurse, who caught Sir Austin sobbing, and own to finding her Dickensonian volubility and humour depressing in the extreme. We greet her with a grimace that does duty for a smile, which broadens into cheerfulness upon her exit. Much of the society of Mrs. Berry would, we own, fit us for Bedlam. The book is so living that it breeds the strong aversions and preferences of actual existence. The

very air of reality about the woman provokes an added weariness. We endure her and listen to her as a living bore, wondering when and where she will stop, without the least inclination to skip a line devoted to her prolonged and disconnected utterances. The humour of her matrimonial differences and of the final *dénouement* escapes us, but we tolerate it as we tolerate the rest of the infinite trials of life. In feeling that the book would be better without her, we feel it just as we feel that our sojourn in a certain place, where we spent the summer or winter, would have been the better for the absence of some other tiresome sojourner, that is all. We cannot remember the place without remembering the obnoxious visitor. So we cannot remember 'Richard Feverel' without recalling Mrs. Berry — an excellent woman, in the main, and an instrument of reconciliation between Sir Austin and his daughter-in-law ; devoted, as bores usually are, and full of all the virtues. Mr. Meredith

loves her, and for that reason we make shift to put up with her. But we could wish her less obtrusive, and, above all, less garrulous and gross.

Richard's experiences in town, illuminated by the mild lamp of Adrian's wit, carry us along with him. He claims our undivided sympathies whenever he appears, and we are not sorry to have him to ourselves without his bride. Lucy may conquer the wise youth by the cookery-book, but as we are not invited to eat of her dinners, we prefer the unedifying sight of Richard upon the Thames and dining with guardsmen and light ladies at Richmond, or escorting his Sir Julian by way of conversion of that indecorous lady to the path of virtue. We like less Lady Judith, the ardent female Radical who married a decrepit lord to carry out her principles, and took Richard in hand, until he succumbed, upon champagne and song, into the arms of the siren. The father who had given him to the world an

immaculate youth was the first instrument of his fall. He desired him to see what Adrian calls the 'demi, or damned monde,' before entering upon housekeeping—an amiable desire on the part of a virtuous old gentleman.

After his fall, Richard awakes to a state of desperate remorse, and disappears to a remote part of Germany. He has found his mother, as well as perversion where he had intended to convert, had discovered the sad little secret of his cousin Clare in her death, and now 'he is trying the German waters, preparatory to his undertaking the release of Italy from the subjugation of the Teuton,' in company with the sentimental politician, Lady Judith Felle. When questioned about him, Adrian says 'he was going to reform the world—unfortunately he began with the feminine side of it. Cupid, proud of Phœbus newly slain, or Pluto, wishing to people his kingdom, put it into the soft head of one of the guileless, grateful creatures to kiss him

for his good work. Oh horror! he never expected that. Conceive the system in the flesh, and you have our Richard. The consequence is that this male Peri refuses to enter his paradise, though the gates are open for him, the trumpets blow, and the fair unspotted one awaits him fruitful within.' He views his fault as a pure woman would, and though knowing of Sir Austin's reconciliation to his marriage and his bride, learning, too, of his paternity, he shrinks from returning to her as unworthy. The scene in the German forest, after he learns the news, is most beautiful, and a worthy prelude to that grandly tragic last scene between Richard and Lucy, when, upon his return, he discovers the plot to ruin his wife, in which the baleful enchantress proves the most respectable and honest of the actors. Richard has challenged her husband, Lord Montfalcon, and hurries down to Raynham, where the fatted calf is ready, as well as numerous open arms, the kisses of

wife and child. The strength of this parting scene is awful. We feel the wrench of it, and the horror, and sorrow itself seems too full for tears. After it the catastrophe of the last chapter is smoothly bridged, and the sadness of Lucy's death and Richard's rise from a sick-bed, numbed with grief, is but a softly-appropriate drop-scene.

As a story, 'Rhoda Fleming' is, perhaps, the simplest and strongest work of Mr. Meredith. Certainly it is the best-told story from the artistic point of view. Like 'Richard Feverel,' it ends tragically, only here the tragic effects are not concentrated upon the end. They pervade the entire book, and the termination is led up to consistently almost from the beginning, where we meet the two sisters, with minds and beauty above their sphere, and see them silently watched by two young gentlemen. The foreboding is unanalyzable, but it is a foreboding, and we apprehend storm and contention and sombre lights.

Sombre the book is throughout, and we regard it as almost impertinent to yield to the occasional pricks of humour that tickle us into quiet laughter. How can we bear to laugh at the oddities of mankind, even at the bidding of such a master, when we see a sweet and pure girl's life going to ruin, and understand that the very nature of her is such that there is no return from the wreck, no after-sunshine to restore the ravages of storm? Here is no picturesque mingling of lights and shadows, no lyrical romance, no melodies of the upper spheres, to imperil the dark remembrance of the *dénouement*.

The very opening is shadowed. At a village feast, when children danced upon a mirthful May Day on a green, lapped in the soft beauty of Kentish landscape, appeared a young woman, who had left her home with a spotted name, and who was left in silence humbly apart. Dahlia Fleming, pitying her, expresses to her father a wish to speak to her. The father stoutly forbade her, and

when Rhoda, the stronger, defied him, and went and stood by the poor girl, he punished her by not speaking to her for a week. And the girls, reflecting on this, marvelled at the cruelty of even the kindest men to offending or repentant women. This is where Mr. Meredith is so original and so just. It is impossible to go far on the road of life without being frequently confronted with the unrecognised fact that it is men, and not women, who are hardest and most cruel to fallen women. It is they in their capacity of householder who pronounce the verdict of damnation, as this Kentish farmer did, and it is soft and innocent women who, like these country maidens, would fain offer them the hand of sympathy and sisterhood. Mr. Meredith never follows the beaten track of generalities. When he gives us a generality, it is one of his own discovery, and you may depend upon finding a very sound truth at the bottom of it.

One of the drollest and completest of Mr.

Meredith's odd characters is the uncle of these girls, Anthony Hackbut, a mythical millionaire, understood by the rustic mind to be vaguely residing in London, and amassing quantities of gold and genial banknotes. The family look to him for elevation and fortune. He passes for a miser because he refused to advance the farmer one hundred pounds in times of difficulties, and sowed ill-will upon the death of the girl's mother by urging as plea his position of great trust in a wealthy bank that prevented him from assisting at his sister's funeral ; nobly offering, in his opinion, to defray half the funeral expenses. He referred to funds as worldly things, and hoped to meet his family in heaven, 'where brotherly love, as well as money, was ready made, and not always in the next street.' He ended by a hint of susceptibility to the friendliness of an invitation to spend a vacation in Kent, and offered one of his nieces the post of house-keeper, should she wish to see London, and

make acquaintance with the world. The seductions were fruit at stalls, oysters and whelks and winkles, pictures in shops, sights of muslin and silks, and rides on omnibuses, with an occasional glimpse of the military on horseback.

Dahlia is surpassingly fair, and the question of her departure is submitted to grave deliberation in an assembly composed of Farmer Fleming, held between a desire to secure the miser's money and a dread of London for his daughter ; Robert, the sedate and handsome assistant, in love with the dark Rhoda ; Mrs. Sumfit, the cook, a very fat and loving woman ; and Master Gammon, an aged foreman, with the cast of eye of an antediluvian lizard, who remarked 'that he never had much opinion of London.' Policy and Dahlia's entreaties prevail, and the fair girl goes up to the great city forebodingly, we believe. It is like a division of souls for the two sisters so devotedly attached. A lovely miniature is sent down

to Rhoda in secret, who marvels at its beauty and at the secrecy. And the next paragraph brings down to Kent old Anthony Hackbut. The scene is inimitable. The queer old fellow, with a disconcerting reserve, tosses Dahlia off upon a charge of giddiness, drinks his beer, because he has not paid for it, propounds an arithmetical problem to Master Gammon, who retorts 'that he is paid to work, and not to think,' and continues to eat his dumplings to the fret of nerves of the watchers impatiently waiting for news of Dahlia. We learn of vestimentary elegances and temper, and of an old man left to take his tea alone; and, like Rhoda, we understand the sadness of it and, unlike her, suspect its meaning. It is the sadder because of the farmer's pride in his handsome daughters, so greatly superior to their station, and of a conviction that he will prove a cruel judge when the hour for mercy comes. Rhoda goes to London to rejoin her darling, her one fear lest this sumptuously-attired

young woman should be ashamed of her rustic garb. Robert, a very masterful and extraordinary young farmer, the intimate friend of a major and a polished English gentleman, the prize drinker in his own village and a water-drinker here, a man of double life and double character, and at the same time single and truthful in both, has already sharpened her acute sensibilities for the penetration of doubt of Dahlia. She is dropped into a bitter depth of brooding by the fact that Dahlia is not there to meet her when she arrives. It is late at night when Dahlia comes to fetch away her mother's Bible, and finds her sister. The surprise decides her destiny for that night. She stays with her sister, and sends away the young man waiting for her on the pavement below.

This young man is the son of Sir William Blancove, in whose bank Anthony is employed as a clerk. Thus had he met Dahlia, to her cost. He and his cousin Algernon,

son of the neighbouring squire at Wrexham, were the youths who stood watching the girls one May Day feast. Algernon is a flippant sinner of the well-known school, generally beset with debts, and not much troubled with morals. Edward, Dahlia's lover, is of other texture — of a perilous superiority, cold-brained, legal, sharp, and unyouthfully serious. They have a cousin, Mrs. Margaret Lovell, whose part in the story it is difficult to define. She does harm, and sometimes appears to wish to do well. Fabulously fair, brilliant and proud, she plays with both young men, and seems to play the mischief all round. In the first scene between the youths we are dashed from a conviction of Edward's cynicism by a very human and sincere cry: 'Virtue, by heaven! I wish I were entitled to preach it to any man on earth.' And yet this cry and the flush are contradicted by his cold perusal of Dahlia's heart-broken letter explaining why she sent him away alone. 'The poor child

threatens to eat no dinner if I don't write,' he says, and we pity the girl doubly.

After this it is no surprise to find Dahlia abroad, and writing home letters breathing frantic worship of the husband she does not name. Rhoda's trusting joy in the news is pitiful—more pitiful still her loyal endeavour to shield her beloved sister when the farmer's wrath explodes over an unsigned announcement of the marriage. In reply to his cry, 'Dahlia Blank ! Who's her husband ? Has he got a name ?' she protests : 'She was very hurried, father. I have a letter from her, and I have only "Dahlia" written at the end—no other name.' 'And you suspect no harm of your sister ?' 'Father, how can I imagine any harm ?' And then the man in his wretched perplexity appeals to Robert, to whom he had hoped to marry Dahlia : 'I'm shut in a dark room with the candle blown out. I've a sort of fear you have in that dilemma, lest you should lay your finger on edges of sharp knives ; and if I think a

step, if I go thinking a step, and feel my way, I do cut myself, and I bleed, I do. Robert, does this look like the letter of a married woman? I can't think for myself. She ties my hands.' To please Rhoda Robert would have lied, and said it did. 'Her face was like an eager flower straining for life,' but all he could reply was, 'She says she's married, and we're bound to accept what she says.' His answer is remembered wrathfully by Rhoda.

Hearing that Edward is married to Dahlia, Mrs. Lovell exclaims, 'Impossible! Edward has more heart than brains.' She resolves not to forsake him in his folly, which means disaster for Dahlia, and ultimately for him. A letter from Dahlia in London brings up Rhoda to her, accompanied by this uncompromising father. Lugubrious portent, Dahlia is not visible to them when they call at her lodgings. Her letter shows that she saw them from the window. The next chapter unfolds the mystery. Dahlia is weeping and

miserable, Edward uncomfortable and protesting. Like young men who embark lightly upon such perilous waters, he is irritated by the discovery that women are 'pieces of machinery that, for want of proper oiling, creak, stick, threaten convulsions, and are tragic and stir us the wrong way.' By way of medicine he suggests champagne and the theatre. To the same theatre Algernon and Dahlia's family have gone, and we may imagine the sensation of their recognition of Dahlia in a box where Algernon has joined his cousin to help the fainting girl. Algernon only is seen, and is believed to be Dahlia's seducer. There is sorrow and the face of stricken and humbled pride in the Kentish farm upon their return. The farmer's sole aim now is to marry his remaining daughter respectably and forget the sinner. The scene between Rhoda and Robert, in which she still implores him to say that he thinks Dahlia innocent, is unforgettable—sharp, strong, and conflicting. He is sorry for Dahlia, and

ready to marry the woman he loves if she will have him. Rhoda heard him not, 'her brain was beating at the mystery and misery wherein Dahlia lay engulfed.' She will not marry a man who fancies he has anything to pardon, and when he lamely protests that Dahlia has nothing to do with her, she bursts out : 'We are one, and will be till we die. I feel my sister's hand in mine, though she's away and lost. She's my darling forever and ever. We're one.'

Pushed by admiration and love, Robert unmask himself. Some of his phrases have a Shakesperean ring. He half conquers the fierce, proud girl by a promise to help Dahlia. He shows himself still stronger in his interview with Squire Blancove, when the farmer calls to accuse Algernon and beg to have his daughter found ; and still more startlingly when he returns to his birth-place, and dodges the young men, flinging written and public insolences at them. Edward, returned to his natural element, shows a

mixture of cynicism and lingering conscience that he only loses in the fiery ordeal awaiting him, when to his and our surprise he finds himself in possession of a passionately-stirred heart. In Robert's native village, where Edward is staying, we meet one slimy wretch called Sedgett, who is destined to be the hero of a horrid conspiracy against Dahlia. Everyone seems to be more or less mixed up in it—Robert, Rhoda, and Farmer Fleming with a sense of duty, Algernon in idle villainy, Mrs. Lovett through intrigue, and Edward as a door of escape from his own responsibilities. Was ever one poor unhappy girl so beset by friends and foes and cruel circumstances to drive her to madness? On the part of her family, strength and stern tenderness resolve for her greater misery; on that of Edward, vanity and cowardice. Abandoned, she falls ill, goes to a hospital, and comes out a broken flower, permanently bent by the storm. What refuge in the eyes of those who unkindly

desire her good is there for her but marriage—with any man whose name she may bear? As for Edward, in his profound remorse and repentance, all Kentish faces are turned ruthlessly against him, against his offer of atonement, and poor Dahlia's cry for his tenderness. Rhoda is his fiercest and most pitiless enemy. Dahlia's letters to him have been suppressed by Algernon, who himself has pleasurable visions of marriage with the victim's sister, and the wild ramping life of the colonies. The general decision is that Dahlia shall marry the loathsome yokel Sedgett, without any thought of the barbarous sacrifice, worse than death for her. And the ruffian is to get a thousand pounds for taking this tarnished jewel—such is the morality of the majority. Pass a woman straight from illegal arms into those of a husband, and you wash her white. The legal repetition transforms the position into virtue.

Edward himself, though desirous of the conclusion, is wounded and astonished by it.

Dahlia's silence startles him, and he continually asks for her letters. He cannot help thinking of her while seeking the distractions of Paris to forget her. Never for one moment does he alienate our sympathies completely, and we understand from the beginning that he is neither a vulgar sinner nor cynic. Indeed, it is with a sense of personal satisfaction that we greet his return to England, resolved upon a courageous and manly atonement—a changed man, unable to get the thought of his unfortunate victim out of his head. In that fine interview with his father we are proud that he has surpassed our predictions of him, and we wish he would be left to warm the poor heart he has chilled to stone.

But Rhoda is there to shield her sister from what she regards as perfidious tenderness. Nothing will induce her to believe in the sincerity of Edward's repentance, nor accept his atonement. The unhappy girl, between all these ill-advised friends and

protectors, is forced to an abhorred ceremony, where at the church door she is submitted to the indignity of being flung off by the ruffian who has married her for money. Is this human retribution? for it is worse even than God's! When later Sedgett comes down to Kent to claim his scorned wife, Dahlia, to escape him, drinks poison, and when Edward comes, showing upon his pallid face the touch of wasting grief for all the wringing sorrows brought about by his own temporary baseness, and Rhoda, melted to him, calls her sister down to happiness, Dahlia is found by the side of the bed, 'inanimate and pale as a sister of death.' She is brought back to life, but not to happiness. Wasted and weak, passion in her was extinguished, and neither the touch of her lover's hand nor his voice could ever again thrill her. Robert and Rhoda marry, but neither Edward nor Dahlia marry. Her heart was among the ashes, and her last words to Robert are, 'Help poor girls!'

CHAPTER IV.

‘EVAN HARRINGTON,’ ‘THE ADVENTURES OF
HARRY RICHMOND,’ ‘SANDRA BELLONI,’
AND ‘BEAUCHAMP’S CAREER.’

THE atmosphere of ‘Evan Harrington’ is neither that of sombre passion nor poignant pain. It has none of the lyrical outbursts that thrill us in ‘Richard Feverel,’ and we are spared in it any violent shaking of the soul. We are allowed to view life more temperately, and follow the fortunes of the characters with an undisturbed exercise of philosophic calm and judgment. A delicious humour colours it throughout, and we are back upon the old sea of metaphors that the writer had nearly drifted from in the simple, undecorated strength of ‘Rhoda Fleming.’

We are tossed about upon its topmost sprays, that sometimes drench us and leave us in wonder whether the author will suddenly get serious and, to use one of his own figures, announce that the curtain has fallen upon this particular part of his performance, and expect us to cry, 'What an exciting game it has been!' Could anything be more boisterous than the description of the great Mel, the tailor of Lymport? There is a Homeric exaggeration about him that fascinates while it bewilders. Was ever such a man drawn since the days of mythological heroes? Great ladies loved him; he dressed himself up as a footman, and thought nothing of setting a house on fire for the privilege of carrying in his arms a titled beauty. He was the guest and boon fellow of lords, and he measured them; he was a tailor, and he kept horses; he had gallant adventures, was preposterously handsome and big and glorious; he shook hands with his customers, and was never known to have

sent in a bill. The writer remarks :
'Such a personage comes but once in a generation, and when he goes, men miss the man as well as their money.'

We do not make the acquaintance of the great Mel, but his spirit haunts the scenes of his turbulent career, and we learn of him through fabulous reports and a family of handsome and distinguished daughters, and one son, Evan. All inherit their father's physical and natural superiority. They pass, as to the manner born, into the upper sphere, and comport themselves in that select circle with dignity and ease. Behind them in the town of Lymport the tailor's shop, with the name of Harrington upon the door, exists, carried on by the great man's widow as a means of liquidating his debts. It is the successes and disturbances, the intrigues and exposure of this superior family—born for greatness but not to it—that the book records ; and never was genius more untiringly and extravagantly used than in the combined efforts of these

three lovely ladies and their brother to conceal the family origin and pass for people of blood. The partial success that crowns their efforts is but an inadequate return for such an expenditure of brain in well-conceived and audacious contrivances. People born with a soul above buttons cannot be blamed for every laudable effort to find their way into their natural element! Imagine a single rose-bush bearing flowers of exceptional beauty in a cabbage-garden, and you will have the incongruous effect of the tailor's daughter, the Countess de Saldar, in a middle-class drawing-room. Grand manners and aristocratic habits were hers, not by right of breeding or blood, but simply by right of nature. So we sympathize with her in all her graceful and unapproachable intriguing to maintain herself in a society to which she had won entrance by her own unaided genius.

Contrast the genial spirit in which the writer records the adventures and difficulties

of this splendid charlatan with the spirit in which Thackeray has painted us his wonderful Becky Sharpe—the broad, half-smiling approval of the more modern satirist, with the ferocity of hate of his great predecessor. Not only does Mr. Meredith admire the woman's genius for intrigue, but he brings sympathy and affection to the task of making her intelligible to us. So far from seeking to make her odious to us, as Thackeray deliberately does in the portrayal of Rebecca, he leaves it impossible for us to judge her more harshly than he himself does. Wherever she is, we know that we cannot be dull, and we are amused and captivated enough to be willing to dispense with the chill atmosphere of perfect morality and candour. He does not pursue her with a relentless exposure of her inmost vices. He preaches no moral after the fashion of the English novelist, and he takes his intriguing heroine as he finds her—an excellent study in which he delights. She is no vulgar hypocrite, like

Becky, under the mask of a fine lady. Born in the sphere to which she feels she justly belongs, she would simply have been a great lady with uncommon diplomatic abilities and with a genius in the shading and splitting of social niceties. Forced to play the part of adventuress, she plays it grandly, and never shabbily. All her marvellous capacities are directed to the concealment of the family shame and to the maintaining of her sisters and brother in the eminence to which they have risen. She is a generous schemer, for her family are included in her enormous ambition. It is not for herself individually, but for the family of the Harringtons, for their united glory and stable position that she so unweariedly plots and intrigues and lies. The three daughters of the great tailor have respectively married a major, a wealthy brewer, and a Portuguese count. Caroline, the beauty, is unhappy as the major's wife, and finally reaches the climax in exaltation by making the conquest of a duke. Evan now

becomes the hope of the family, and it is on his fortunes, his efforts to appear a gentleman, seconded by his sister's (the countess's) efforts to penetrate into English aristocratic society, and secure an heiress for her brother, that the story runs.

The heiress in whose pursuit Evan is carried off to Portugal to learn the management of his mouth, how to dress his shoulders and to direct his eyes, is Miss Rose Jocelyn, one of Mr. Meredith's brave and loyal girls, with a sweet spice of naturalness in her virtues and in her defects, if she can honestly be said to possess any. In her train we find Evan returning to England, clad like a wandering don in sombrero and cloak. Rose's expressed dislike of tradespeople gives him a hankering to announce himself as such, which honest intention the countess resolves to thwart, and is herself thwarted by Providence in the shape of a brother tailor, who comes aboard the *Jocasta* to announce the great Mel's death, and both ruins and

saves the situation by mention of a shop and a uniform. Evan's experiences on the road and in the shop are drawn in Mr. Meredith's best style, and we are introduced to one of his oddities, Tom Cogglesby, and also to the suffering countess in low society. On his way up to London Evan is engaged in an ugly fight in an inn, where he comports himself as the only gentleman, and those born to the title as cads—not an uncommon exchange of rôles. He meets Rose, and instead of London he, with his guide and protectress, the incomparable countess, turns to Beckley Court, the home of Rose's parents. Here the countess has a field worthy her great talents. To keep her footing firm, to guide Evan through the briars of a false position, and help him to win Rose, whom he honestly loves—this is no small undertaking with such combined forces against her. Lady Jocelyn calls her 'a female euphuist, euphuism in woman being the popular ideal of a duchess.'

The pronounced comedian in a book where

all the characters pertain more or less to comedy, is Mr. John Raikes. The tricks that are played on this young man by fortune and by men are innumerable, and there is perhaps a flavour of Dickens about him in the prolonged burlesque he plays. His burlesque lovers' quarrels and the countess's intrigues fill the middle of the book, until Evan breaks his neck in a breakneck leap.

Here is an opportunity for the countess, which she uses to some purpose. Unfortunately, she is felled by a stroke of fate, and her origin is exposed at a dinner-table with the duke. The little shadow of tragedy peeps here in the married misery of Caroline, the most beautiful of the sisters, and beloved of the duke. The fortunes of hero and heroine are fluctuating, and on the whole better for Evan than might have been expected. He is known to be a tailor, and yet the half-engaged lover of a beautiful heiress, and the guest of her parents. It is

true, the widow of the great Mel, bent upon honesty, imperils the situation, and Evan completes the work by taking upon himself one of the countess's crimes, is rejected by Lady Jocelyn, and leaves Beckley Court under a cloud, only believed in by Juliana, Rose's rival. The fifth act finds him in London studying tailordom, offered the protection of Caroline's duke. Juliana, the heiress of Beckley, desperately and vainly in love with him, dies leaving him Beckley Court and all her possessions. Here is a comical reversal of things, and an opportunity for clearing away all doubts of him by one sweeping act of generosity. Rose is engaged to his rival, Laxley, and when her father hears that Evan renounces the estate, and exclaims, 'He must have the soul of a gentleman! There's nothing he can expect in return, you know,' cuttingly retorts, 'One would think, papa, you had always been dealing with tradesmen.' The end may be anticipated : marriage for Rose and Evan,

and the consolations of the Church of Rome for the dear countess.

‘ Sandra Belloni ’ and ‘ Harry Richmond ’ are two of Mr. Meredith’s pictorial and melodious novels. Pictures and song abound in them, and breathless vivifying races with passion. Writers are not uncommonly enamoured of their heroines, and while none of his can claim a lack of sympathy and admiration on Mr. Meredith’s part, there are three that stand out as rivals for the post of his heart’s beloved. In different ways, all leading to the one source, like the various roads to Rome, is he equally the recording lover of Emilia or Sandra, Clara Middleton, and Diana. These are his trio of perfect and bewitching women—not perfect in the wooden or puppet sense, but perfect with the lovely perfection of nature steeped, in the case of two, in the unanalyzable social charm which he so well knows how to make us feel and thrill to. Clara is the exquisite maiden of upper England, who could never be imaged

out of her social surroundings ; Diana brings to breeding an exhilarating dash of rebellious Irish blood and a purity of body and mind no less superlative than her younger sister's ; and Emilia, unlike both, is all passion and flame mounting on the swell of song.

It is a long time since I read this entrancing novel, and here in Paris, where I write, it is not attainable for reperusal. Hence many of the names of the characters have escaped my memory, though I can recall their personalities and actions vividly. I am still impressed with the acquaintance of a wonderful Greek—a Mr. Pericles, a wandering millionaire, ready upon hearsay to traverse Europe in the trail of undiscovered musical genius. Staying at the country house of one vulgar wealthy merchant, Mr. Pole, he unearths something like it in the voice of Emilia. The Pole family consists of three of those inimitable, ambitious, and diplomatic ladies that only Mr. Meredith hitherto has drawn us. I forget their names.

There is a brother, Wilfred Pole, a cornet, one of those limp and flaccid *jeunes premiers* novelists and opera-composers are fond of selecting to sing the sweetest tenor in duet with the heroines. The hero of the novel, as of the opera, is usually the heroine's foil, his unworthiness the shade against which her splendour and strength shine. There is a dreadful Irish widow, whose name I certainly remember — Mrs. Chumps. This awful creature is, like the Irishman of English comedy, purely the result of Saxon imagination dwelling upon our island without the illumination of personal knowledge of the race or the country. I have here in Paris met a Scotchwoman who gravely informed me that she was gathering materials for an Irish novel, though she admitted she had never been in Ireland, and her acquaintance of Irish people is exclusively confined to the few specimens of the race she had had the misfortune to meet with abroad. I shall be curious to see that novel when it appears,

and fancy she is not the first Britisher to represent us to posterity upon materials for observation so slight and so misguiding. The only sympathy the lady mentioned appears to bring to her gigantic task is a partiality for a liquid as peculiar to the lowlands and highlands of Scotland as to the mountains and bogs of Ireland. May unlimited quantities of whisky enlighten her and enliven us! for she is bitten by a mighty hatred of the nameless Celt. Under such circumstances, barring the stimulus of mountain distillery, the widow Chumps seems to have been drawn. Her brogue savours more of the Thames than of the banks of the Suir. Such an Irish brogue is nowhere to be heard in Ireland. And there is something curiously alien to that country in her denseness and want of sensitiveness, for we know that pride and sensitiveness are the curses of the race. She is an old flame of Pole's—'me Pole' she perpetually calls him, to the horror of the refined daughters and the elegant cornet;

and as Mr. Pole has squandered her money entrusted to him, he is obliged to endure her overt tendernesses and force his children to bow to her. This contest produces several lively scenes, including the sequel when the widow finds she is betrayed and cheated and her Pole a bankrupt. Mr. Pericles adds to the liveliness, and also one Lady Something, who is almost in love with Wilfred, and plays an ugly trick on him and on Emilia by getting him to declare his passion for her and his indifference to Emilia within the latter's hearing. The curtain drops on the degradation of the gallant cornet and the sorrowful enlightenment of Emilia. There is also a tragic figure of an organist and impoverished baronet, who loves one of the ladies of the Pole establishment, and commits suicide because she, loving him, must marry for her family, and several lively social youths and maidens and matrons, who act chorus, wittily, epigrammatically, and sprightly, as Mr. Meredith's chorus ever does. Then

there are Italian politics—a favourite theme with the writer—an attractive Welsh brother and sister, and several unforgettable love-scenes; notably, one great passionate love-scene at Wilming Weir by moonlight, worthy to rank with those matchless chapters in ‘Richard Feverel.’ The lover himself is weaker and more pitiable than the average young gentleman elected by the novelist to pipe fluted sentimentalities to the sweet thrilling note of the heroine; a man—or a make-believe of man, which is by far the commoner article, for true and real men are rarer than true and real women, rare as these be—who could doubt the delicacy of Sandra’s passionate cry, ‘My lover!’ and who ‘could pledge himself to eternity, but shrank from being bound to eleven o’clock on the morrow morning.’ Writers are sometimes compunctious for the abasement to which they have submitted their heroines, and spare them the wedding-ring. Sandra does not marry Wilfred, and we hear of ‘the mellowed

depth, the soft human warmth, which marriage had lent to her voice,' afterwards in Italy. I forget whom she married, but I daresay it was her Welsh lover, the noble Italian enthusiast, blessed with a noble sister.

'Harry Richmond' is truly a delightful novel, and, next to 'Richard Feverel,' ought to be the most popular of George Meredith's books. It is all wild adventure, bubbling, bursting fun and lyrical outbursts. Impossible to catch and analyse its charm. It is a book written to weave a spell about youth and sober age. Its exuberance is unparalleled; not the exuberance of Dickens or Lever, but a quaint and original exuberance of the metaphysician and the poet taken suddenly to football and nonsense verses. He brings a relish quite other than that of the habitual jester, fetches from his chest wilder shouts of laughter, flings his ball, and tosses off his verses with a sincerity and ardour not known to those to whom such things are in the ordinary way of life. Or,

at least, we are at liberty to imagine he would, for few of us have had the privilege of observing such a mixture as metaphysician and poet at play. Who can ever forget the inimitable and arch-impostor, Harry's father, Richmond Roy—his captivating personality, his eccentricities, his feats, and his comet-like passage across the sky of our imagination? His life is a splendid comedy, though occasionally the comic muse drops us into farce as broad as any to be found in the early English dramatists. We are not even allowed to preserve a decorous gravity at the recital and exposure of his woes and misfortunes. Molière himself never devised a broader farce than his *rôle* in the German prince's court and his expulsion therefrom. And Shakespeare himself, had he written nineteenth-century prose, could never have given us a lovelier picture of a little German princess and her English boy-lover, with all the proper scenic effects and landscape beauty. And what, pray, are the rough,

swearing old grandfather and Julia's husband if they be not English to the backbone, brutally, faithfully English, like Squire Western and a host of that school? They are imaged to us pure eighteenth-century—barbaric, powerful, big drinkers, and men of mighty physique, with whom there is no temporizing upon the domestic hearth nor elsewhere. This is not comedy, but life. English, too, are the scenes of Harry's boyhood, his life in the farm and in school, where he makes the acquaintance of Walter Heriot, in love with Julia, the schoolmaster's daughter, and his life-long boy-friend; and afterwards the little wild gipsy girl, whom Heriot betrays. All these pictures, vivid and humorous, carry us irresistibly.

Afterwards we touch a new chord when the religious sea-captain carries off the lads for the good of their souls, and one fine morning we find them straying through a lovely German forest, where they meet the little German princess—divinest and most

witching of serious little maids—and Harry's father. The story is like real life, too complicated, varying, and plotless for a brief summary. Light and air and warm life-blood quiver and flow through the chapters. With the writer, we are mounted upon a winged steed, and carried breathlessly through space. The characters are too numerous for naming, and yet all have their distinct and special parts. If they are minor at all, it is simply as the constant succession of faces through our personal experiences are minor—that is, to us—but not, we feel, in the part they individually play. We understand acutely that they are not there solely to please their creator, and do his bidding like puppets. They are not introduced to teach a moral or propound a theory, or even consciously to act as chorus. They are men and women, rustics, clowns, and society men and women, who have their distinct tastes, their distinct utterances, and their distinct capacities. The epigrammatist is never absent, and we are

always delighted to meet him or her. Of course, an English commoner, however wealthy, cannot marry the daughter of an hereditary prince of Germany, and after many adventures, heart-sorrows, and joys, the countless intrigues of his father, a duel with an Austrian prince (his rival), and the single kiss of blessedness bestowed on him as upon Herr Teufelsdröckh, poor Harry returns to England in the pursuance of an equally breezy career, made up of wind and wave, of storm and soft English sunshine. His father's personality tops him; and lends the element of the grotesque to the gravity of his adventures. We cannot take him seriously with such a background.

But Mr. Meredith does not wish us to laugh unrestrainedly, and so he presents us with a figure of exquisite unblemished pathos in Harry's sweet Aunt Dorothy, a lady we can never remember without an odd sensation about the throat. The glamour of purity that makes no parade of coldness, of

divine unselfishness, of uncomplaining, scarcely-felt suffering envelopes her like a veil of glory, through which we rather define than perfectly see her. She passes through the book a beautiful ghost of pale womanhood, shedding beneficent rays upon her path. As a girl, finding her lover beloved of a weaker sister, she pleads with him for her, and makes an altar of her happiness for the younger one. When the sister dies, after unhappy wedded experiences, leaving a little boy, Dorothy is the boy's mother and the father's secret benefactor. She never marries, and all her money is devoted to the anonymous discharge of the arch-impostor's debts, which, in this spurious offshoot of royalty, we may imagine were royal enough. The scene in which this fact is revealed is, for fiction, of superhuman strength — not the restrained sense of modern art, but the battle-axe strength of mediæval times. Harry marries the squire's heiress, his cousin Janet, and deserves repose for the rest of his days.

Mr. Meredith has written one dull book. 'Beauchamp's Career' would be almost unreadable, other than patiently read as an exhaustive political treatise, if it were not for Mr. Romfrey and the face of Renée, that brings the soft radiancy of a dream to bear upon its intolerable dulness. Would not this charming description make amends for much?

'A brunette of the fine lineaments of the good blood of France. She chattered snatches of Venetian caught from the gondoliers ; she was like a delicate cup of crystal brimming with the beauty of the place . . . Her features had the soft irregularities which run to rarities of beauty, as the ripple rocks the light ; mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and bloomy cheeks played into one another liquidly ; thought flew, tongue followed, and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night-lightning. Or oftener, to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed : her age was but newly seventeen, and she was French.'

Beauchamp himself is an impossible fellow,

too wearisomely in earnest, of a single note, which he twangs in a monotonous variety of tones from morning until night. We fancy at the start, after the ominous prologue, that we are fronting a humorous adventure when we find him a sailor lad, addressing his challenge to the gentlemen of the French guard. But unhappily we are not shown the French guardsmen reading his missive, and the episode falls flat. We feel we have been deceived, and resent the deception. To make up for it, we give our sympathies, such as they are, to the uncle, a mixture of twelfth-century baron and unintelligible Whig. He relieves us of the monotony of Beauchamp's lance-breaking with society, and his extraordinary conduct in his heart affairs. No sympathy is due to a man who could go prating politics through drawing-rooms and missing two such women as Renée and Cecilia Halkett to fall upon Jenny Denham. Indeed, there are some chapters in the book that provoke a sigh in the bosom of the con-

scientious readers for the useful art of skipping. Noticeably those dealing with that unmitigated old bore, Dr. Shrapnel, and his everlasting letters. Mr. Romfrey suggested that his speechifying nephew should be sent into his element over in Ireland. But no Irish speech-maker of the most pronounced stage in the disease could ever match Beauchamp by reason of the latter's want of humour. Irish orators off the Parliamentary stage and the public platform are ready to laugh at themselves and at each other, whereas Beauchamp is in deadly earnest from six o'clock in the morning until twelve o'clock at night. Surely it can have been nothing else but sheer weariness that forced the writer to pitch his hero unexpectedly into the Channel, and bring his career to an untimely end. Never was catastrophe more inexplicable, and from the artistic point of view less justifiable, than Beauchamp's death. We wake as from a prolonged nightmare with a gasp. Having failed to understand

why he was there at all, we fail still less to comprehend why he is knocked into eternity in a single last page, and instead of being touched, we are simply astounded. Of a truth, the drawback to the book is its politics incessantly harped upon. The subject, treated in the high colours of Dumas, of the plumed and sabred days, carries a scent of intrigue and romance to interest us; or the song and chapters of revolt, conspiracy and revolution have our hearts for a nod. What should we have done had we waded through all this truly English stuff of Whiggery, Toryism and Radicalism, without the sweet refreshment of those Venetian days—the night on the Adriatic, and the lovely morning at sea under the Alps? Or canvassing with this tiresome hero without the society of that amiable and amusing idiot, Lord Palmet, whose mind runs to women, and who murmurs before a virtuous voter in a local institute, ‘Capital place for an appointment

with a woman'? This is the key of his mind and his moods, but it is refreshing after the dance young Mr. Beauchamp has led us, and promises to lead us, to the end sans intermission.

He is not returned for Parliament, happily for the country, and again we are rewarded for our trials and patient endurance of them by another glimpse, all too brief, of Renée in her Norman home at Tourdestelle. This is a delightful break, but the inconsequence of Mr. Meredith's characters! None of them seem to know their own mind, neither the men nor the women. At one moment we find Beauchamp wanting to run away with Renée, and Renée holding back. At another Renée running off to Beauchamp, and Beauchamp virtuously holding back. Again, Cecilia awaits his proposal, and he is inexplicably silent, though pushed to claim her by inclination, interest and friends; when he makes up his mind to propose, she is off to Italy, engaged to a man she does not

love, knowing the man she loves was to arrive the day of her departure to claim her. Do some people act in this way out of such a novel? We are constantly expecting Beauchamp to wreck society and create a revolution. Yet at the end his uncle, the quaint, twelfth-century baron, says: 'He hasn't marched to London with a couple of hundred thousand men, and he escapes what Stukely calls his nation's scourge, in the shape of a statue turned out by an English chisel. No, we haven't had much public excitement out of him. But one thing he did do: he *got me down on my knees.*' He married Jenny Denham and left a son behind him. This is all he did besides.

CHAPTER V.

‘THE EGOIST,’ ‘DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS,’
‘TRAGIC COMEDIANS,’ AND ‘SHAVING OF
SHAGPAT.’

BUT however great and individual ‘Richard Feverel’ and the other novels of George Meredith may be, and however high a place some of us may accord them in the collection of books that, once read, become our daily companions—a sort of mental sustenance upon which we speedily learn to fall back from sheer force of habit—not even ‘Richard’ can be described as the most individual of Meredith’s works. In it is no hint given of the peculiar stand this new genius was to take among modern writers. In it we were not led to scent the great champion,

the mighty swordsman of woman, by his commonplace Lucy and his silent Clare. 'Richard Feverel' was like a sun-burst, broken with storm and strife, flashed upon the insipidity of latter-day fiction and exposing its perishableness. Of such a writer anything and everything might justly be expected, but even from him was 'The Egoist' a surprise from which we have not yet had time to recover.

Here this subtle psychologist concerns himself neither with plot nor passion; neither with tragedy nor romance, nor with any of what may be called the passional springs of action and will. If 'Richard Feverel' was an original and bewildering canter along the highway of fiction, 'The Egoist' may be described as a breathless charge into the unknown, a direct and forcible challenge of the unsuspected. Here we see mercilessly unveiled civilized man, as he thinks and feels, in the person of a handsome young squire enjoying every advantage of nature,

fortune and birth. Nothing in him courts rejection of our sympathies. He is not a villain, and he is a polished, perfect gentleman, well informed, well mannered, well groomed, and exceedingly well mounted for a more than spirited ride through the plains and over the hills of experience. Such a man as Sir Willoughby Patterne, of Patterne Hall, in command of a rent-roll of £20,000, the ordinary novelist, or even our old friends, the great Immortals, could only conceive as playing a successful and a triumphant part through life. Why, in fact, should punishment and humiliation of the lightest nature pursue a youth in whom no vicious taste, no fixed vice, is pronounced? And who but a dissector so utterly merciless as Mr. Meredith could find courage to drive his dissecting-knife straight to the heart of the conventional system, and qualify the unrevealed disease of this graceful ornament of county society by the ugly name of egoism? the malady of the Ego? Who else but this

captain of woman could draw us maidens bold enough to read the man and reject him, in spite of the big social bribes he carries in his hand? Ah, this is Mr. Meredith's great and original note, once he has relieved his youthful soul of the romance of 'Richard Feverel.' Woman is his study, especially young militant womanhood, and what a study he has made of her! Upon this theme not a single male writer, living or dead, since Shakespeare, can approach him, and to it he brings modern subtle penetration added to Shakespeare's purely natural instinct. Not only has he caught the bloom and poetry of womanhood, and made her visible to us to the soul—this were the achievement of the poet and the artist of very exquisite perceptions; but he has got at the very root of her nature—quite another thing. Women reading him gasp at his revelations, such as they would never dare to make or dream, so completely hedged round are they by the conventionalities of fiction. When they take

to writing stories, they either set themselves limitations in the portrayal of their female characters stricter than their brothers, or to hide their own ignorance of themselves (a mystery for us as much as for men) set off at a galloping pace into the realms of improbability.

In all fiction there is not another girl so enchanting and healthily intelligent as Clara Middleton — none described like her. In addition to the attractions of birth, breeding, and beauty which the writer thoroughly relishes, are those of sensibilities that can be delicate without affectation, a delightful wit untainted by smartness, singular good taste and tact, and honesty of soul. Here is a sparkling young woman as clear as daylight, as fresh as the morning dew, beautiful to look upon, as Meredith's women always are, sweet and bewitching without any shabby tricks of mind or habit, who at the same time thinks for herself, a rare virtue in the male novelist's heroine. She is all

warm blood and variable moods, as befits her age and sex, but never once untrue to the finest instincts of maidenhood, and unerring in her judgment. She is not perfect, her accomplishments are not enumerated, we never find her playing Beethoven or reading the stars, and somehow, without one word having been said upon the subject, we get the impression that she is a young woman of intellectual resources, and qualified to pronounce upon subjects that engage the minds of sages and artists, while the music of youth runs blithely through her veins, and her feet are nimble in a race with a school-boy. It is her struggle with her lover, the Egoist, that completes the interest of the book.

Here we have Mr. Meredith purified, polished, complete, without any break in the unity of his work, or any awkward twist in the even flow of narrative, based solely upon subtle and most delicate analysis. The durability of such work is quite as obvious as

that of the best that has already withstood the test of centuries, and when to-day's literature comes to be old-fashioned, 'The Egoist' will still hold its place as a lasting monument of psychological diagnosis.

Of the story itself little need be said, as it hangs upon a single situation unfolded in one act after a short prologue introducing us to the chief *dramatis personæ*. And can one possibly hope to explain how this situation is worked and twisted and unfolded—how illuminated and ransacked to its most hidden depths for the undiscovered clue of self, for the unrevealed spring which prompts even our everyday 'yea' or 'nay'? To endeavour to do so would be to undertake a task only second to that of the writing of 'The Egoist.' Meredith, I should imagine, would shrink from it. It is simply an analysis of the Ego. The universal Ego takes the polished and affable form of a young English squire, the pink of perfection, and highly commendable to ladies of fastidious

tastes, the eye of whose soul is turned ceaselessly upon self. There he walks and sits and talks before our newly-illuminated vision, naked to the soul, each beat of the heart discovered without its protection of flesh or garment ; not one single young man whom we meet and part with in fiction, but the large pervading personality of human existence crystallized to one permanent shape—not Sir Willoughby Patterne, of Patterne Hall, but the soul of selfishness endowed with a form that might just as well have been yours or mine or our next-door neighbour's. This is Meredith's most absolute triumph of art, to which he brought all the resources of his scientific knowledge of humanity—his powerful phraseology and marvellous metaphor.

Other writers have drawn us pictures enough of selfish men and selfish women. They abound in the literature of all races, selfishness being one of our commonest defects. But Meredith has given a heart and

soul and mind to the vice ; in fine raiment and graceful proportions, smiled upon by the undiscerning, he makes it tread the boards of our common experience, with the blood and nerves and muscles of manhood. This is an achievement of which even a man of such singular genius as his may be proud. Other writers are happy when they succeed in drawing a type—in immortalizing a single character ; but this one has done something greater, more unique and more imperishable still. Into space he enables us to stare, marvelling, at something hitherto barely suspected, now a tangible form with familiar lineaments and unforgettable tones of voice, a something that we dimly understand rises up with us and lies down with us, gives the stamp of meanness to our best endeavours, and misleads us in our noblest aspirations. Sir Willoughby is the personality of self that floats subtly round us and centres all our thoughts. It takes a masculine shape because the course of the world, both civilized and

barbaric, is directed by the wheels of male selfishness. Feminine selfishness has quite another direction. It affects the domestic circle, the persons and interests immediately within its scope. It may bring added discomfort to the immediate victims, but it leaves the world without merrily indifferent, conscious of superior strength that can always laugh it down, with a vitality that cannot be sapped and a confidence in laws that form a barrier against its encroachments. Not so male egoism. This makes straight for the whole race of women, mercilessly potent by reason of physical force, and backed by all the laws, written and unwritten, of its own making.

It is this crushing exposure of the widespread plague, the extension and mingling of its fibres, the crudity and coarseness of its very refinement and super-fastidiousness, that gives 'The Egoist' a scientific as well as an artistic value, and commands for it in English literature a place apart.

As a work of art, it is, indeed, the most complete and perfect thing that Meredith has done—a flawless masterpiece without any of the writer's eccentric deviations and mannerisms. Perhaps oppressively witty, though much less so than 'Diana,' striking none but the delicately comic chord, and turning to pathos upon the point of a smiling curl of the lip, it carries us through a few weeks' comedy at a pleasant canter to the accompaniment of fanciful humour and polished irony. If we come upon an occasional odd effect—a queer simile, a bit of isolated poetry lapsed into prose, a bar of pure melody dropped into speech—we recognise with pleasure and delight the author of 'Richard Feverel,' and we greet him with a cordial smile. This other writer is new to us, but not the less welcome—less serious, more polished and more fanciful; and while less of a poet, he is more of an artist—less philosophic, he is much more scientific. The play of wit is less sparkling and more penetrative.

It shines, a soft luminous light, with undiminished radiance throughout the book, lending itself less easily to quotation, baffling even the memory by the quality of the flying phrases. Upon all subjects of daily life has he something original to say, and he can even be poetical and fresh, and compel our senses to delighted thrills upon the worn-out theme of woman's dress—a theme that wrecks other writers and leaves them dismayed by the dulness and insipidity of their own description. Read those lines in 'The Egoist,' upon Clara's dress in a breeze.

The characters, as I have said, are few. Clara, the heroine, described by Vernon Whitford, that scholar and student of equable temper, as 'a mountain echo'—an idea that still lingers with us when we have closed the book as the sum of her sweetness, wholesomeness and natural charm—and by Mrs. Mountstuart less felicitously as 'a dainty rogue in porcelain.' Here we gather an added something of her exterior, and *look* at

a mountain echo with the eyes of fashion, just as we see through the same sharp and unimaginative eyes 'the sunken brilliancy of the lean long-walker and scholar in a Phœbus-Apollo turned fasting friar,' and the poetess, Lætitia Dale, upon her vivid stroke, 'coming with a romantic tale upon her eye-lashes.' This is one of Meredith's tricks—the uttering of pointed phrases by the tongues of sharp, clever women. Sometimes they are far-fetched; always are they too carefully trimmed and edged, as hasty phrases have not often the felicity of being edged. In general it is the fault of his characters to talk too brilliantly, and he forgets that men and women in their commonplace moods are not habitually metaphorical and literary.

As the essence of self-made man, it may be thought that Sir Willoughby is meant to represent an unpleasant and an unusual type. Not so at all. If it had not been for Meredith, he might have gone tranquilly down to the grave, and not even his worst enemy

would have had very obvious cause to scent the wolf within him. We meet him first upon his majority—a very fascinating and fastidious young Englishman whom we gradually understand is the letter ‘I’ vivified and made human, mentally as well as physically straightened to its erectness, and as uncompromisingly personal. We heedlessly learn of his dallying with Lætitia Dale, of the silent and unexacting worship of this soft rhyming representative of ‘starving women who endure their hunger uncomplainingly, and are too proud to offer themselves for the sensational pity of a world ever in demand of dramatic situations. We enjoy a secret satisfaction in his discomfiture when Constantia Durham leaves him in the lurch and runs off with the more cheerful military figure, and yet we still hardly realize what manner of man he is when he in turn plants Lætitia and seeks distraction in three years’ travel. Meredith makes us understand that he is a youth of spurious niceness, who objected to

his betrothed talking freely about male cousins and friends, and considered the pursuit of competing admirers a stain upon her. Cloistral purity was his demand in the market ; woman emerging from an egg-shell, 'somewhat more astonished at things than a chicken . . . and seeing him, with her sex's eyes, first of all men.'

How much we thank Meredith for showing us the 'infinite grossness' of this demand! And how we relish his quiet laughter at Sir Willoughby's loathing of the 'dust of the world' touching the privileged object of his choice. We conclude that Miss Durham was a young person of spirit and sense when she ran off with Captain Oxford, and heartily wish her good luck upon her wedding-tour, while Sir Willoughby abroad is holding an 'English review of his Maker's grotesques.' What a delightful stroke that is against the British tourist! Thackeray never matched it. If you would measure it fully, you have but to stand apart and watch the faces and

listen to the criticisms of our fellow-countrymen abroad. Everything that is not British is grotesque.

As the Creator is just as responsible for foreign countries and foreign races as for Great Britain, these criticisms, as Meredith wittily points out, comprise a review of His grotesques. It is in such light and inimitable pen-strokes, to be found on every page, that he shows us the man made bare to the very heart. All his social virtues are ruthlessly traced to the meanest source : his wish for cloistral purity in woman, his regarding the presence of competing admiration as a soil, to its true Oriental origin, the monster egoism of his prayer that even beyond death his bride should be his alone, and of his desire to shape her character to the feminine of his own, without any consideration for her natural and healthy preference to be herself. All young men who think it part of the poetry of love to wish to see the unhappy maiden of their

choice reduced to ashes or incense, and transmuted by love until they literally become 'the man they are to marry,' cannot do better than study the Egoist, and see for themselves the manner of man they are. The study will fill them with a sense of horror of themselves and of the accepted notion of the infinity of love which Clara, listening gravely, conceived as 'a narrow dwelling where a voice droned and ceased not.' In her sharp apprenticeship as the betrothed of this amiable young squire she learned to become an attentive listener. Little else was expected of her. But it was the destiny of this intelligent and impulsive girl to give Sir Willoughby many a rude lesson in the sex she represented, that left Constantia's elopement and free talk of male cousins and friends in the shade as minor offences against taste and cloistral reserve. After the preliminary descriptive pages, the book is completely given up to Clara's struggle for freedom and her lover's despe-

rate efforts to retain her, fearful of ridicule and the ignominy of a second jilting. She rashly compromises herself with a brilliant Irishman, while unconsciously her heart is given to the Phœbus Apollo turned fasting friar to whom Sir Willoughby, meditating revenge, intends to hand her over upon granting her the freedom she claims, rejoicing privately in the fact that his own choice had irredeemably spotted her for another. There is something pathetic in the poor Egoist's delusion, and while we heartily despise him, we are against our judgment forced to pity him when in the strife his true character is exposed even to his life-long silent worshipper, Lætitia, and we see the unhappy gentleman upon his knees to that discarded devotee imploring her to marry him, so that the county should not say that he had been despised and rejected by three women, one of them poor and his inferior. His misfortune and abasement are contemptible in their cause,

and contemptibly borne, nevertheless the something in us which responds to this terrible monster within him begets the pity of brotherhood. Degraded, shrunken, stripped of the glory of success, we see in him a monstrous image of ourselves, of all mankind, so that we are afraid to turn from him and wring hands with the wretch in a kind of shamed sympathy. We readily admit the pure comedy of this sublime absurdity in human form reduced to such shabby dimensions and exposed for the ridicule of posterity, but we cannot laugh very joyously at the exposure. There is too much truth in it for the comic muse; and the pathos is too apparent.

As Sir Willoughby is Meredith's typical analysis of the male's character, so is Diana Warwick his chief type of woman, and just so ruthlessly as he is drawn is she drawn mercifully—too mercifully, perhaps, for she is painted in all the glowing colours of love. Mr. Meredith is not the analyzer of

Diana ; he is her ardent lover. He adores her unscrutinizingly, as it behoves the true lover to adore his lady. He paints her very faults upon worshipping knees, and does not think it necessary to apologize for her or urge one word of excuse or deprecation when, following fact, she stoops to a shabby breach of confidence worthy the lowest new journalist. She is Diana to him in all her moods, a bewildering and adorable creature, and as such he expects the reader to swallow her thankfully, rejoicing in her as he does, wondering at the stupidity and evilness of the world that condemns her, censuring the meanness of the recreant lover who deserts her upon discovery of her unexplainable betrayal of his confidences. If his lady chooses to start out at midnight, fresh from a love-scene in which she has learnt from her lover a great political secret, to sell it for a very substantial sum to a London editor, Mr. Meredith simply follows her as an admiring

recorder, and finds it sufficient explanation to tell us pityingly that she was a child in this world's affairs, that she was as ignorant as a child in business matters, and had no idea of the gravity of her action. This last plea we accept willingly, for impulsive women like Diana rarely have any notion of the weight of actions, and never can measure their consequences ; but for a simpleton in worldly affairs she showed a pretty accurate knowledge of the value of her secret and of its market price, and for a lady to sell secret information learnt in a love-scene seems to us an unmistakable fall which, however much we may deplore, we hold ourselves exempt from admiring, or even condoning, as Diana's apologist desires us to do.

As an Irishwoman I cannot but be grateful to this big Saxon giant for his generous advocacy of a famous country-woman whom posterity persists in holding spotted. He has taken her up in the teeth

of British opinion, and being deeply enamoured of the splendid creature, he is not satisfied in proceeding to whitewash her, which would have been a simple enough task, but he has clothed her in soft cloud and fine radiance, he has all but sketched her wings, and shown her standing tip-toe on hard, solid earth with glance strained ethereally upward. Not by any means an angel, but a young goddess, half woman, a creature of exquisite freshness, originality, bewildering wit and soaring intellect, as lovely as Aurora, and as cold, purer still, and more remote from the contamination of gross masculine admiration, than Diana. Her mind flies upon barbed phrases. Her commonest words take the shape of pointed, illuminated arrows. She is the beautiful Egeria of a young minister of state, the immaterial soul of a polished old statesman, by whom she almost loses her social head, and is only saved from the block by the stout defence of her devoted friends. She

is sunshine in a delicate and not happy lady's life, carrying a whiff of Irish mirth and wit with her delightful presence into the stately and decorous gloom of English town and country existence, a mental draught of champagne wherever she goes, all impulse and brightness and warmth of heart. And how this masterful knight of hers, turned biographer, lashes those who were stupid and wicked enough to misjudge her! For every tear, every painful contraction of brow, they forced her to in life, are they punished by his unsparing pen. He uses it in her defence like a true crusader's sword. He reviews her enemies in an almost passionate anger, names them, notes every conventional trick and fault, lays bare the tiniest spot upon which to point his dreadful lamp of ridicule, and then proceeds to shiver their self-respect to atoms, to disperse their highly-prized, respectable prejudices, and leaves them divested of all but heavy British stupidity, that prevents them from

seizing the charm and comprehending the personality of this brilliant young star shot from the Sister Isle into their astonished midst. Her freshness is the eternally vernal freshness of the shamrock, her faults and impulses the voice of a generous race seeking expression through her ardent soul. He makes her enemies his enemies. He wears her colours nobly, gallantly, as behoves a gentleman in whom the mediæval strain still runs. He carries her gloriously through the divorce courts, leaving her wooden Saxon husband, of narrow, official soul, utterly abased and shrunken, instead of triumphant in her fall. We behold her after this crucial ordeal clearer, whiter, more radiant than ever; nearer to the immortal Diana she images by reason of her new freedom; clear-eyed as a maiden returned to the forest-mists of unsullied imagination; and behind her in the mire lies the crushed marital form, unutterably mean and shabby and foolish with his absurd 'Yah, yah,' on his lips.

In the case of her English husband and her recreant English lover, her defender has no worse fault to urge against them than the stiff-necked prejudices of race. Both we see like respectable carriage-horses in harnessed strife with a young war-steed ready for dangerous speed and nerve-upsetting tricks — a potent, self-willed young creature, sniffing menacingly at conventionality, audacious from excess of purity, perilously poised upon every incalculable impulse, and in spite of a powerful intellect, scatter-brained upon all the ugly brinks in her career. No wonder the unhappy Saxon gentlemen allied to this wild and too lovely Hibernian lost their heads and turned tail when it came to a choice of swallowing her whole and entire and following meekly in her wake, the obedient satellites Mr. Meredith thinks they ought to have been, with heart filled with gratitude, and eyes full of love and admiration.

That they did not do so is their lasting

shame and reproach, and he reviles them as starched officials and stiff-necked Britons. Whereas another and a less partial biographer would mildly commend them to our pity, because of their undeniable sufferings at the expense of a female engine that ran them down and left them in fragments upon her path, he is only content in piecing the fragments in order the more powerfully to hold the feeble creatures up to our ridicule. If it had not been for that fatal newspaper episode, we should have been more than disposed to share his ardent sympathy, and range ourselves as warmly as he upon his heroine's side. But the newspaper episode is an exceedingly big camel to be asked to swallow without as much as a wry face, above all to swallow and preserve intact our ideal of a persecuted, disinterested, and very noble woman. Though not the most artificial of his books, the atmosphere of 'Diana' carries a heavier scent of the midnight oil than even that garishly brilliant

study of a pair of tragic comedians. There are dialogues in 'Diana' that only stop short of requiring a key—noticeably one after-supper scene when the air is charged with electricity, and wit oppressively polished flies hither and thither, broken confusedly upon rainbow sparkles of thought. Though we are sick of commonplace chatter, the intensity of self-consciousness and prolonged mental effort involved in such a game of battledore and shuttlecock, such a desperate intellectual race for the prize for barbed phrases and skilfully-managed metaphor, are surely exhausting. Diana and her numerous satellites seem never in the course of their lives to have enjoyed five minutes' naturalness, and never to have known the luxury of mental dressing-gown and night-cap. Like the sun, their intellects never sleep, know not even the charm of drowsiness; and it is frequently a strain upon lazy, easy-going readers, used to Thackeray and Dickens, to follow the unceasing play of intellectual

pyrotechnics. The most beautiful thing in this remarkable book—next to Meredith's generous defence of his heroine,—the tenderest, most naturally, humanly painted, is the sweet and faithful friendship between two intellectual women, one a soft-hearted, delicate Englishwoman with the milder and more clinging sentiments of her race, and the other our vivid Diana, made up of Irish cloud and Irish laughter, with her robuster and more ardent temperament. This is a fresh debt that women owe their mighty champion—the recognition of their capabilities for mutual friendship, faithful love and generous admiration, which the cynical male habitually denies them. Emma Dunstane married, loves her bright Tony, as she fondly calls Diana, above all the world; and Tony, tossed upon a sea of amatory difficulties, in turn beloved, rejected, and divorced, faithfully loves her friend Emma above even her faithless and her faithful lovers, of which Heaven knows she has

choice enough. One of them, Mr. Sullivan Smith, is a sensational and finely-natured Irishman, too apparently created after Lever to be of value as a serious study.

The story is well known. A beautiful, witty, young Irishwoman marries a wooden English official of docketed opinions well phrased. She is loved by many, notably one other Englishman, Redworth, a fine contrast with her husband, and Lord Dannisburgh, whose admiration excites her husband's jealousy and leads to divorce. Her faithful friends throughout are Lady Dunstane and Redworth; afterwards Percy Dacier, at first suspecting and coldly scrutinizing, goes over to her and finally succumbs. He is a stiff and starched young Englishman, faultlessly correct and attractive after his fashion, which is the reverse of a warm one. Diana loves him, but there is a sort of Diana mist thrown over her love, which shows it as burning a cold clear light like ineffectual sunbeams upon a glacier.

The young minister of state and she are engaged, and he returns late one night to breathe a state secret into her ears. This is the blot upon her character, the irretrievable blot upon her life. When he has kissed her for the first time—though no word so barbaric and indelicate as ‘kiss’ has been written in the record by the writer, fastidiously sensitive in preserving the snowy plumage of his paragon—explaining that he is but a mortal lover after all, she says the fault was hers that she was degraded. This is straining at gnats to swallow an enormous camel. She goes forth from this first embrace to sell his political news to a leading editor. Fact or fiction, we cannot get the unutterable ugliness of it out of our minds. But whether Dacier was justified in throwing her over for the action is for male judges to say. Great and passionate love, the sort of love such a woman should excite, would, I imagine, have found a ready road to pardon. Dacier is a cold-blooded

politician, with whom we have not much sympathy, and are not sorry to see him degraded in his creator's eyes, and, beside his brilliant betrayer, shrunken to shabby dimensions. He goes straight off—marries a pious and virtuous young heiress, and drops out of view. The stricken lady, reduced to a state of suicidal prostration, about whom the voices of rumour are for a second time busily and unkindly engaged, is not without her champions. Mr. Sullivan Smith and Arthur Rhodes meet on their way to propose for her, and eventually her faithful lover, Redworth, wins what he gallantly and manfully regards as a prize, and thus the end is saved from tragedy. We leave Tony too dazzled to know if her views of life are brighter, and bearing love for a dower to her husband. Only we continue to wish she had not visited that newspaper office.

Equally artificial and brilliant, and of a fascinating brevity, is 'Tragic Comedians.'

Limelight plays blindingly upon the characters, and Clotilda and Alvan seem to flash before us like a couple of splendid meteors, to faint and fade in their own exhausted light. We blink and gaze after them, thrilled, startled, and subdued by their resplendency, with a keen sense of the theatrical in their portraits and in their actions. Garish the book is, but most vivid, of a fascination not to be coldly analyzed, of a charm indescribable. It is simply the short story of the wooing of a royal lover, of his lady's betrayal of his love, and of her marriage with his rival. Never was a wooing like Alvan's, never such a lover. That is why we doubt the reality, and dream of the footlights. We listen to him and read his telegrams, and in spite of the Alpine sunlight and the cool mountain air, we think of fireworks. We read of Clotilda's golden hair, and we picture her flying through the clouds, chased by her fellow-meteor and fronted by the black night of marriage that extinguishes

her after his decent burial. Some of their sayings seem written across the memory in letters of dancing light, and we dream of the scenes enacted by this pair of tragic comedians long after we have left them. Of all Mr. Meredith's lovers, Alvan is the one who fascinates and thrills us most.

Taking a general survey of his qualities, we may note that Meredith the writer and man is always more interesting than even his best characters. It is how he develops them, what he thinks of them, his inimitable asides and epigrams, that we look for most. In this he is not Shakespearian, for whereas we get nothing of Shakespeare in any of his plays, in all of his books do we get much of Mr. Meredith. And in none of them too much. The one in which he sinks himself completely is, to my thinking, except as a remarkable *tour de force*, the least interesting. This is the 'Shaving of Shagpat.' George Eliot described it as pleasant light reading. This reads like a joke, if so

illustrious and serious a personage as George Eliot could be deemed guilty of perpetrating a joke so mild. The story and its abounding verses are more Eastern than probably anything in Oriental literature, and if we had not 'Vathek' as a precedent, we should be disposed to regard the feat as an incredible one. For after 'The Shaving of Shagpat,' 'The Arabian Nights' reads as a model of sober commonplace and the epitome of everyday experience. Not only is the style Oriental, but facts and colouring and atmosphere are fabulously so. The impression left upon the bewildered reader is that of a kind of dazed passage beaten through a mass of broken jewels in a soft artificial light, richly perfumed with the heavy odours of Eastern flowers and scents. Houris and genii; roses, lilies, nightingales; diamonds, opals, rubies, and sapphires; jets of flame starting into illuminated fountains from the heart of lilies set in opal lakes; winged voyages through the pure Eastern air, over

cities and plains and sunlit and moonlit landscape ; impassioned Oriental songs, gorgeous metaphor richly massed through a wearisome brilliance of colours and imagery ; wild amorous speech and tales, and descriptions of feminine beauty to turn the head of a sage and awaken a throb of envy in the breast of Théophile Gautier. Conceive, in fact, every strong imaginative effect heaped in reckless profusion, till, from sheer fatigue of overwrought senses, we hail with delight and relief the seizure of the Identical, the final triumph of the barber, and the shaving of Shagpat. There are many beautiful passages in it, and the humour of the parody is both subtle and exquisite, but it is too luscious for a single reading, though we may agree with the poet :

‘Ripe with oft telling, and old is the tale,
But ’tis of the sort that can never grow stale.’

This is Mr. Meredith, un-English and impersonal, and he pleases us less. We

prefer his human comedy and his home comic muse to this parody of distant literature. We like best to feel his Saxon iron grasp and his deep glance ransacking humanity, as it lives and breathes, to its uttermost depth, and twisting it to every unimaginable revelation. We feel then in the presence of our prose Browning, earnest even in his laughter; Titanic, with an unsuspected softness of heart beneath a rugged and untender manner, and upon a homely shaft of mother-wit ready to shade from us the scientific penetration of his inward vision of us. His wit is like a rainbow lighting up a stormy sky, and his mocking carries no baleful suggestion of a sneer.

CHAPTER VI.

GEORGE MEREDITH'S MEN AND WOMEN.

LIKE Shakespeare and Scott, Mr. Meredith is uniformly gallant in his romances. With the exception of Richard, his young heroes are generally feeble youths; sometimes pleasant and good-natured, like Harry Richmond and Evan Harrington, and at others bloodless, make-believe men like Wilfred Pole and Percy Dacier. But all, as in the case of Scott's amiable young men and Shakespeare's lovers, are merely foils for the greater worth of the heroines. Imogen, Juliet, Beatrice, Miranda, the ladies of the gentlemen of Verona, Portia, and Lady Macbeth are all unworthily mated, and as Mr. Ruskin has said of Scott's heroes, we

are left wondering at the extreme and unmerited good-fortune of these various young men who have drawn prizes, apparently as rewards for their amiable and pleasing manners. The fluted tenor of romance is on the whole an ill-treated personage. We invent him to do the love-making instead of ourselves with the different ideals of feminine perfection we imagine. But with his qualifications, his serious merits, we are not concerned. So long as he is handsome, has the art of using his voice, his mouth, and his eyes, carries his doublet and hose gracefully, twangs the guitar of loverhood musically, and recites his sonnets to advantage—behold the virtues we demand of him. He must be picturesque, above all, and the bloom of youth must lie upon his cheek, else as a sonneteer and troubadour is he pronounced unserviceable by the orchestra.

Now, the heroine is quite another matter, as Mr. Meredith, following great examples, shows us. She must claim our sympathy,

our love, and our admiration. She must be surpassingly fair, and no less lovely of mind and soul. We are to quit her enamoured and regretful, vividly aware of her attractions, both mental and physical. And this has Mr. Meredith achieved in the case of all his heroines — maidens and widows. They are beautiful, witty, pure, womanly, and most captivating. Each one holds us enslaved as we follow her fortunes. She has but to open her lips, and we are at her feet. In spite of his harshnesses, Mr. Meredith remains great by his generous sympathy with the weak. In the strife between men and women, a strife he never blinks away, or feigns to discredit because his men choose to fall in love with his women, he ranges himself upon the side of women always and inevitably—and what a defence in the ranks of the enemy! He brings no drivelling, one-sided sympathy to bear upon the subject, but clear, logical sense and a keen eye for

the weaknesses of the sex he defends. He laughs at woman sometimes, and enjoys a witticism and a taste of cruelty at her expense. But he makes it understood that his laughter is not scoffing and his cruelty is not bitter. On the contrary, they but add flavour to his championship, and make us the prouder of the big blows he directs against her tyrant. The tyranny of his own sex he doubts as little as its selfishness, which he has immortalized past cool endurance for man in the person of Sir Willoughby Patterne. The conventional woman, all horrors and shivers at the aspect of the natural and undecorated, made up of drawing-room theories and lap-dog sentiments, he rejects as unworthy of that which he conceives woman might be, if relieved from the sentimental trammels and restrictions that the selfish grossness of man has imposed upon her. He believes that women would be all the better for living more as men do, and men for meeting them half-

way—one sex modified by the other, and mutually ennobled; eating healthily in acknowledgment of all healthy appetites, as opposed to the coarse Byronic view that condemns them to live upon air and the sentiments. Sandra talks freely of potatoes, fine ones too, while her sentimental lover writhes and shivers, feeling pelted by those potatoes, and the founts of love are nearly dried at the root of his heart. Can a young gentleman with a proper respect for himself feel romantically disposed towards a young woman, even if she be divinely beautiful, when she owns to a capacity to dine off potatoes? or ascend to heaven on an aria when the prima-donna refreshes herself with bottled stout? For such types, frequent enough, he suggests that sunlight must be too strong and gross, and wonders why they have not set their wits to invent some soft extract of a shadowy illumination wherewith to diminish the terrors and uglinesses of mere nature.

He acknowledges the influence of woman in no false, Frenchified way, but accepts it as the strong ordeal and revelation of man. 'Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man, or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. . . . By their state is our civilization judged ; and if it is hugely animal still, that is because primitive men abound and will have their pasture.'

Of his men, it is the old and oldish young that he draws best. His social epigrammatists and his grave, elderly gentlemen, or his caustic, elderly humorists, like Sir Austin Feverel, the immortal wise youth whose wit never goes to sleep, the gigantic fraud, Richmond Roy, and his *fidus Achates*; Tracy Runningbrook, Stukely Culbrett, Seymour Austen, and a host of such others. We must not forget Clara Middleton's Irish colonel, a very pleasant figure in 'The Egoist,' the German princess's father and Everard Romfrey. All these men have a point in common. Their wits are keenly

alert, and they know not how to be dull. They are also gentlemen. Not that all, or many of Mr. Meredith's male characters of high social standing, can lay claim to this qualification. There is in him, as in Thackeray, a singularly strong flavour of democracy, and a tendency to reveal us the snob concealed by the varnish of breeding. The young gentlemen in 'Evan Harrington' are the exact reverse of our ideal of the article. Harry Jocelyn borrows money from the tradesman he insults before repaying it; gets money from him to give to a wretched girl betrayed by him, and does not apply it to the purpose for which it has been given; conducts himself in all circumstances as an offensive boor and an abject cur. The young lords and squires around him do likewise. Some of the gentlemen and peers in 'Richard Feverel' are very unpleasant and shady company, and in 'Rhoda Fleming,' Mr. Algernon Blancove would find the average clerk in the back streets of a manu-

facturing town his superior in manners and morals. We get some queer specimens of upper-class snobocracy in 'Harry Richmond,' and what, pray, is Sir Willoughby Patterne if he is not a wondrously decorative and polished snob, contemplating complacently his own superiority in the mirror of his mind's eye?

On the whole, Mr. Meredith is hard on his own sex. Sometimes he draws a young fool like Lord Palmet in 'Beauchamp's Career,' who can be a lord, a fool, and a gentleman at the same time; who makes us laugh and holds our sympathies, there is something so extremely natural in his idiocy and something so very engaging in his candour; and then we feel that the author is not hard on him, and has no desire to excite our contempt. But this tenderness to young men of gentle birth is rare in Mr. Meredith's volumes. His laughter at them is not usually soft-hearted, but grim, as in the case of the youth who bought cigars to save

himself from excesses in charity, and who, after an ill-digested dinner and wine, sat so long without moving a leg that he indulged in the belief that he had reflected profoundly, and woke up with the philosophic intent to forget himself; being under some doom, nobody caring for him, happiness unknown to him, born under a bad star, and 'following his youthful wisdom, the wounded hart dragged his slow limbs toward the halls of brandy and song.'

As an apology for his somewhat merciless dissection of fools like these young men, Mr. Meredith adds :

'One learns to have compassion for fools, by studying them; and the fool, though nature is wise, is next door to nature. He is naked in his simplicity; he can tell us much, and suggest more. My excuse for dwelling on him is that he holds the link of my story. Where fools are numerous, one of them must be prominent, now and then, in a veracious narration. There

comes an hour when the veil drops on him, he not being always clean to the discreeter touch.'

And so he diligently leads us through the unshadowy mental recesses of the fool in question, as a sample of others abounding, not compassionately by any means, with perhaps too pointed a suggestion of sneer on the tip of his caustic pen. He shows him awaking to the conviction that England is no place for him to dwell in—a conviction we cordially share, with the consciousness that England alone could have produced him—with visions of himself married to a wife who in the colonies would make butter or cheese while he rode on horseback through space; saw himself rejoicing her with a declaration of love, astounding her with a proposition of marriage, and in little more than a week sailing on the high seas, new-born; 'nothing of civilization about him, save a few last very first-rate cigars, which he projected to smoke on the poop of the

vessel, and so dream of the world he left behind.'

If this is compassionate treatment of the fools, we wonder what Mr. Meredith would be likely to regard as severe handling of the genus. Indeed, Algernon Blancove, as the typical brainless young English gentleman, of no morals and less manners, runs in several varied editions throughout the author's works. We come upon him under different names, sometimes more of a boor, as in the case of Harry Jocelyn; sometimes more of a gentleman, as in the person of Ferdinand Laxley, but ever drawn from the same persistently objectionable type.

His older men, like Major Waring and Seymour Austen, he touches with a truly remarkable kindliness; a gentle sadness and reasonableness pervade the atmosphere in which he steeps their picture, and such is their humane influence upon him, that he drops, or nearly drops, metaphor, and adopts the language of commonplace but cultivated

humanity. If, as has been said by M. Taine, George Sand makes us wish to be in love and the English novelists aim to make us wish to be married, Mr. Meredith may be accused of a desire to prove to us that in men middle-age is more attractive and lovable than youth, and that the sedate sadness that accompanies it but adds to the dignity of life, its thoughtful measure never exceeding a refined and placid geniality, and knowing no other discord than a very mild sense of disapprobation. In his men of this period, and even beyond it, he indeed portrays us thorough gentlemen, patient and honourable men of dignified habits of life and of keenly alert wits. Sometimes they have just a flavour of fire and brimstone unconsumed in an anterior stage, as in the case of Beauchamp's delightful uncle. He is a sort of twelfth-century baron pleasantly masquerading as a nineteenth century country gentleman, and more than one romantic young person would be indisposed to hesitate

upon the side of youth, if ordered to make her choice between this elderly gentleman and his fiery nephew. Nearly on the first page he enchants us with the honest wholesomeness and vigour of his talk, when, in reply to something Beauchamp has said, he exclaims :

‘ Damned fine speech ! Now you get out of that trick of prize-orationing. I call it snuffery, sir, it’s all to your own nose ! You’re talking to me, not to a gallery. Cæsar wraps his head in his robe ; he gets his dig in the ribs for all his attitudinizing. It’s very well for a man to talk like that who owns no more than his bare bodkin life. Tall talk’s his jewellery ; he must have his dandification in bunkum. You ought to know better. Property and titles are worth having, whether you are worthy of them or a disgrace to your class. The best way of defending them is to keep a strong fist, and take care you don’t draw your fore-foot back more than enough.’

Such he walks the book, a stout and

resolute old gentleman, with words of sense upon his lips, capable of manly tenderness and dignified concessions, and the embodiment of all virile virtues as well as those belonging to his class. While the charming French girl and the sweet English maiden hold our senses thrilled, it is this mediæval baron that soundly raps our nodding judgment, and keeps our wits awake.

Sometimes, as in the case of Edward Blancove, Mr. Meredith wheels us round from cold dislike into sympathy and admiration. But not often. His unpleasant young men are not more susceptible of conversion than they are usually to be found in real life, and he is not fond of playing such tricks as this one, wherein we get from the lips of a coldly argumentative and sharply legal young gentleman, who has, hitherto, conducted himself as something of a well-bred knave, such honest words as these :

‘ Plainly, sir, in God’s name, hear me out. She’s—what shall I call her ? my mistress,

my sweetheart, if you like—let the name be anything—"wife" it should have been and shall be—I left her, and have left her, and have not looked on her for many months. I thought I was tired of her—I was under odd influences — witchcraft, it seems. I could believe in witchcraft now. Brutal selfishness is the phrase for my conduct. I have found out my villainy. I have not done a day's sensible work, nor had a single clear thought, since I parted from her. She has had brain-fever. She has been in the hospital. She is now prostrate with misery. While she suffered, I — I can't look back on myself. If I had to plead before you for more than manly consideration, I could touch you. I am my own master, and am ready to subsist by my own efforts; there is no necessity for me to do more than say I abide by the choice I make, and my own actions. In deciding to marry her, I do a good thing, I do a just thing. I will prove to you that I have done a wise thing.'

Such words as these would redeem a stormier and a shabbier youth than Edward Blancove's; they toss him up from the brink of common rascality upon the verge of quiet heroism. We are forced by them, not into condonation only, but into respect and admiring amazement, and we are almost glad of a fault that has been so nobly redeemed.

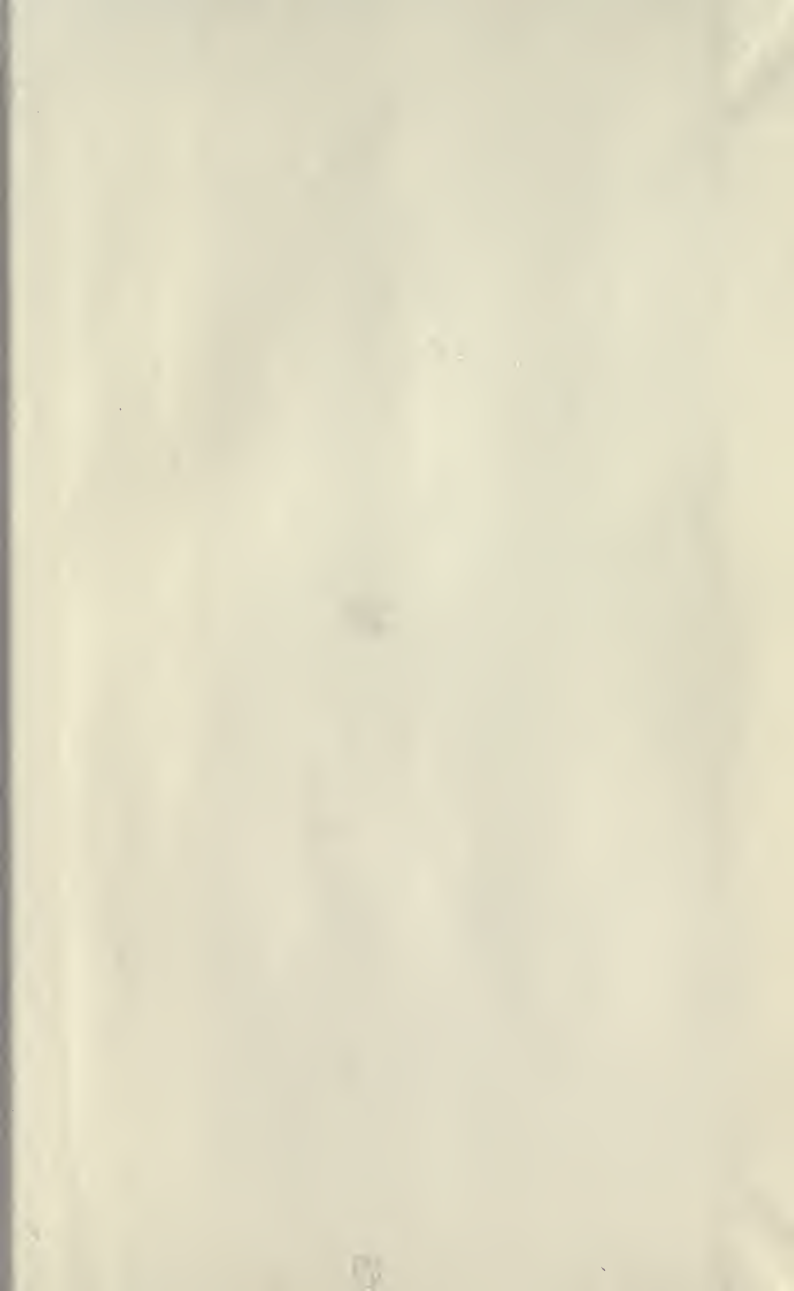
Apart from any other claim he may have upon his generation, Mr. Meredith's greatest and most original will ever remain his marvelous knowledge of woman. All young girls upon the verge of womanhood should be recommended an exhaustive study of him upon this subject, as a healthy antidote against the nauseous and abominable travesties of themselves and their species circulated by the libraries, in which volumes, however bad the men may be drawn, the women are ten times worse, fifty times more unnatural, and at least a hundred times more corrupting to the sane judgment. From him, instead of the

current inanities in which the typical heroine of the circulating libraries is enveloped past recognition of human sisterhood (thank Heaven! for a fraternity with the monstrous doll would be a greater grievance than any we owe unkind nature), will they learn much upon their sex that will give them material for long and profound reflection. They will learn that the eggshell appearance of woman upon the boards of experience is a gross exaction, the remnant of a grosser stage in man—that the demand is the reverse of a compliment to her. Instead of that ragged aphorism (clothing of a lie), ‘that the hardest on women are women themselves,’ they will be offered a higher and juster estimate of their own natural mercy, and will hear ‘that a woman in the pillory restores the original bark of brotherhood to mankind,’ a remark to give them pause and set their brains in another direction. They will also learn, what they can never sufficiently appreciate, that ‘what a woman thinks of women

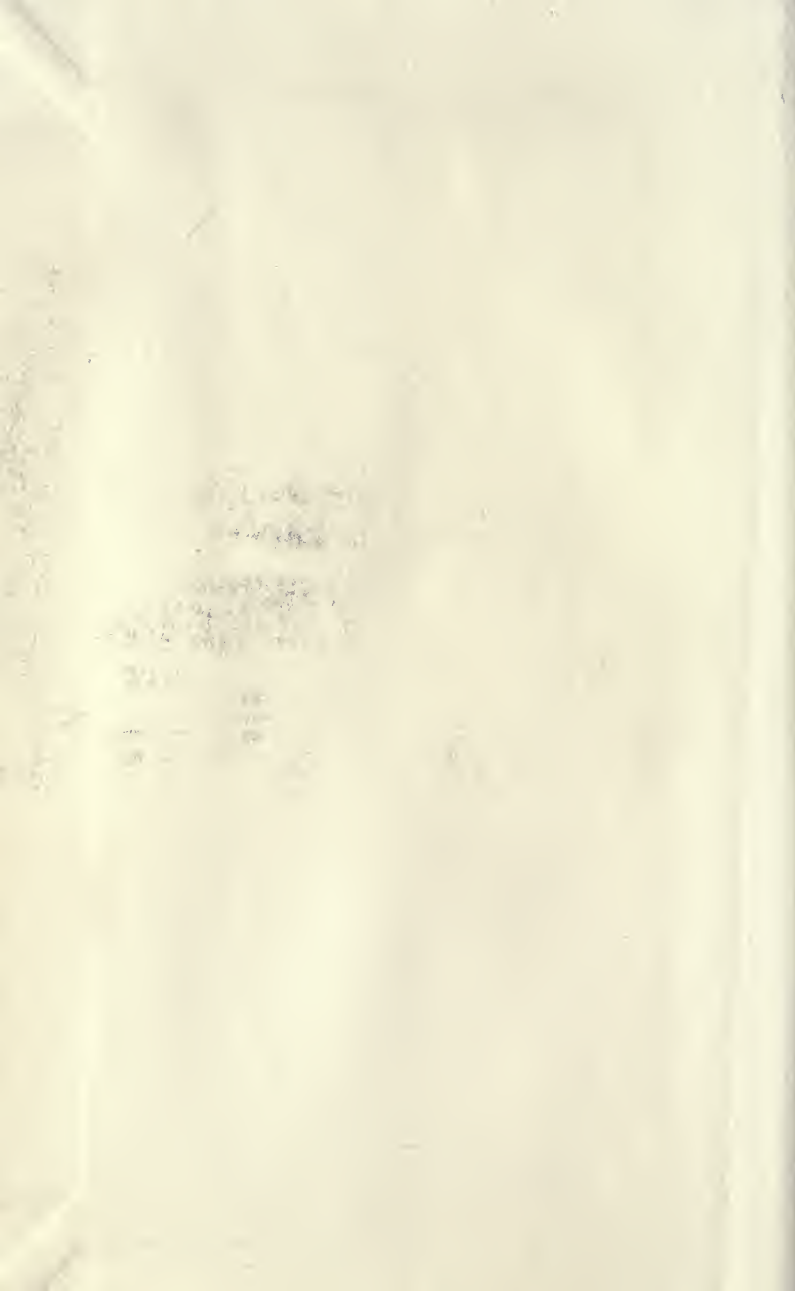
is the test of her nature;’ that ‘in their judgments upon women, men are females, voices of the present sexual dilemma,’ and that in their desire to have a ‘a still woman who can make a constant society of her pins and needles,’ ‘they create by stoppage a volcano, and are amazed at its eruptiveness,’ and a word upon which we cannot too insistently weigh, a gallant word from a male pen, ‘that the motive life with women must be in the head, equally with men.’

THE END.

94







PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

PR
5014
L8

Lynch, Hannah
George Meredith

